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FUTURE

ISSUE 398

+

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V RISING
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WORLD EXCLUSIVE ACCESS

ELDEN RING SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE

⦿ IN-DEPTH VISIT TO FROMSOFTWARE'S TOKYO STUDIO

⦿ EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH LEGENDARY DEV HIDEAKA MIYAZAKI

⦿ SEVEN-HOUR HANDS-ON WITH THE BIGGEST GAME OF 2024

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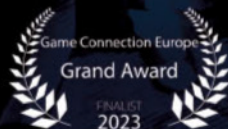
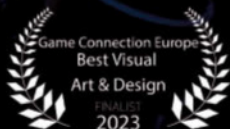
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“SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE IS THE BIGGEST NEW GAME OF THE YEAR”



Expansions to pre-existing games rarely garner massive levels of anticipation. But in the case of *Elden Ring*'s new expansion, *Shadow of the Erdtree*, that rule definitely doesn't apply. This is not just the most anticipated release of 2024 for many members of the PC Gamer team, but also in my opinion the biggest new game of the year, period.

What luck, then, that PC

Gamer delivers the ultimate *Shadow of the Erdtree* exclusive this issue, in a mega scoop involving travelling to Japan, interviewing Hidetaka Miyazaki, and playing the expansion in depth. Discover it all on page 38. Enjoy!

ROBERT JONES

Twitter
@rnicholasj

This month

Wandered the Land of Shadow, a place obscured by the Erdtree, for one worthy to face in combat. Nobody came, though, so instead he kicked back in an ornate throne while drinking an Asahi Super Dry lager. Ah, ichiban!

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

**WES FENLON**

Twitter
@wesleyfenlon

This month

Worked from the future to deliver this month's cover story. There was tempura and hot aliens, apparently.

**CHRIS LIVINGSTON**

Twitter
@_clivngston_

This month

Secretly became the face of the US government's real-world Vault-Tec programme. Thumbs up!

**MOLLIE TAYLOR**

Twitter
@mollietayy

This month

Fell asleep watching a longplay while writing a piece on the joy of falling asleep to longplays.

**HARVEY RANDALL**

Twitter
@HJRwithpen

This month

Wrote a screenplay for the *Helldivers 2* movie. It's called Dive Hard with a Vengeance.

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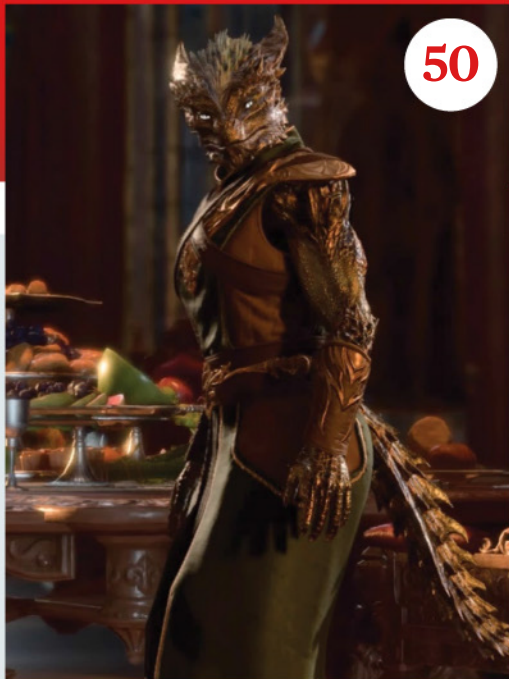
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[MONITOR]

NEWS

ENT

More than a few helldivers have ended up dead at the hands of allies.



IMPERFECTLY BALANCED

Arrowhead says **HELLDIVERS 2** balancing patches have 'gone too far'

I don't envy the folks at Arrowhead charged with balancing *Helldivers 2* guns fans have grown attached to. The studio has rolled out some balance patches in the last few months, which I believe made the game better by buffing weak guns less often, and nerfing a weapon that's too dominant.

But there's an argument to be made that balancing shouldn't be taken so seriously in a PvE shooter like *Helldivers 2*, and that it's OK if one gun is dealing more damage than the rest. Replying to a player who said recent patches have made the game

"unplayable" Arrowhead CEO Johan Pilestedt conceded that he's not satisfied with his studio's current balancing approach. "I think we've gone too far in some areas. Will talk to the team about the approach to balance," he wrote. "It feels like every time someone finds something fun, the fun is removed."

"IT FEELS LIKE EVERY TIME SOMEONE FINDS SOMETHING FUN, THE FUN IS REMOVED"

Pilestedt says he's seeing "a bit too much balancing using damage instead of other measures such as recoil, reload speeds, accuracy, projectile speeds and equip speeds. Just tweaking damage numbers is a blunt tool". The CEO didn't reference specific nerfs, so it's hard to pin down exactly what he has in mind here. The last big balancing patch could be described as 'too many damage tweaks', but many guns also received non-damage alterations.

ERUPTOR DISRUPTOR

It's possible Pilestedt is thinking about the Eruptor rifle, which was nerfed because it was too dangerous

FROM THE ARCHIVES

TIPS FOR WINDOWS



Ever struggled to track down a process in Task Manager and wished the processes would stop jumping around? Hold down the Ctrl key to freeze it in place. This handy shortcut should be at everyone's fingertips by now – it's existed since 1994. And yet, so many don't seem to know about it. ■ **JR**

FROCK HORROR

SKIRT CAUSES A STIR



Lili mains were not best pleased when a *Tekken 8* cash shop skin, which ported over an old *Tekken 5* costume, was missing a key component: her skirt lace. Valid criticisms of paid-for cosmetics lacking finer detail were made, and director Katsuhiro Harada promised to put things right. ■ **MT**

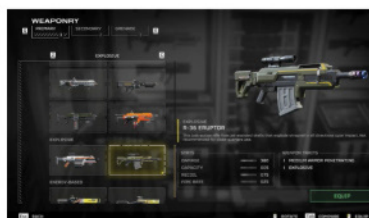


NOT ALONE

LORD OF THE MANOR



A competing city-builder developer took issue with the idea that *Manor Lords* is made by one person. The *Farthest Frontier* dev told PC Gamer that people comparing the speed at which they can get stuff done with *Manor Lords* "drives me nuts" because they have a small team as well. ■ **EG**



TOP: *Helldivers* is about the friends you detonate along the way.

ABOVE: Has the humble Eruptor made Arrowhead reconsider everything?

for everyone around it. It doesn't fire bullets, but micro-missiles that deal AoE damage on impact.

Until a patch, hits from it would also shoot out waves of 'shrapnel' in random directions that dealt additional damage. It's these shrapnel waves, which had a tendency of bouncing toward and killing helldivers, that Arrowhead has removed and replaced with more direct damage.

Some fans on Discord and Reddit aren't happy with Arrowhead's compromise. Without shrapnel, the post-patch Eruptor has smaller explosions, and isn't as good at clearing out swarms of small bugs. Its puny explosions don't make it stand out the way it used to.

To the credit of Arrowhead's balance squad, they're listening to feedback on the updated Eruptor.

"We can't bring the shrapnel back the way it was," said senior game designer Alexis Kravchenko. "We don't want it to one-shot chargers, and we don't want it to have a chance to kill you or your teammates (we have a cluster eagle for that)."

"However we're still investigating if this change has affected any breakpoints against medium enemies, and we will look into that. I won't promise that it will definitely be buffed, as the weapon in its current state is still absolutely viable. But it's always on our radar." ■

Morgan Park

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Overwhelmingly Pream

Cyberpunk 2077 finally hits Overwhelmingly Positive recent Steam reviews.

Viva New Vegas

Todd Howard says, "*New Vegas* is a very, very important game to us."

Return to Sender

Adult Swim has returned control of its Steam catalogue to the games' creators.

Embrace, Extend, Extinguish

Microsoft shuttered Arkane Austin and Tango Gameworks.

Sony's month in hell

Helldivers 2's sign-in crisis hit a crescendo when Sony removed the game from sale in 177 countries that don't have PSN.

Escaping Tarkov

An ill-judged new \$250 package for *Tarkov* gated access to a new PvE mode, outraging players.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Dragons, eh? The Spy has had plenty of run-ins with the gigantic wyrms in The Spy's time and, let The Spy tell you, it's definitely not all hordes of gold and heroic deeds. It's more often singed breaches and a smell of sulphur in the hair that just won't come out no matter how many times you take a dip in the Waking Sea.

The other thing about dragons The Spy has learned is they're like busses. No, not that two often come back-to-back, but that if they come at all, which in Britain they have a tendency not to do, then it takes an age for them to appear. Go toe-to-toe with a dragon one moment, and you might then find yourself significantly older before another emerges.

Older, much like The Spy has got while waiting for the next game in the *Dragon Age* series to come out: *Dragon Age: Dreadwolf*, which The Spy has spent the best part of a decade spying on. Indeed, The Spy started Operation Dreadwolf as soon as the final DLC for the previous *Dragon Age* game, *Inquisition*, came out in 2015 and here we are, nine years later.

DIRE WOLF NEWS

Sadly, though, Operation Dreadwolf has been one of The Spy's toughest ever assignments. Following the fourth *Dragon Age* game originally spinning up in 2015 as *Project Joplin*, and being overseen by long-term *Dragon Age* lead Mike Laidlaw, the game was at first stalled by its team being moved to aid the floundering *Mass Effect Andromeda* and then, later, the even more troubled BioWare online multiplayer live service game, *Anthem*. Eventually, due to BioWare's troubles, *Project Joplin* was cancelled and Mike Laidlaw left the game maker entirely.

The next *Dragon Age* game was then restarted as *Project Morrison*, and was conceptualised to include a live-service component, multiplayer, and be based on *Anthem*'s code. And, while The Spy can report this is the game that *Dragon Age: Dreadwolf* has become, albeit with the multiplayer part dropped, the project has lost a lot of its devs along the way, including the vast majority of the original veteran



Dragon Age designers. The Spy was there, undercover as Varric's embroidered posing pouch, when 50 staff at BioWare were fired in August 2023, including Mary Kirby who was one of the *Dragon Age* series' original writers.

Fast forward to this year and *Dragon Age: Dreadwolf* is set for an official reveal this summer, with The Spy able to confirm that the *Mass Effect* team at BioWare has been brought on-board to get the game finished. While The Spy could not purloin a release date from the BioWare mainframe, The Spy did get eyes-on with the game's more action-RPG gameplay, as well as details that the game is set in part in the Tevinter Imperium.

The Spy also heard whispers in the *Dragon Age* rumour mill, that fan-favourite witch Morrigan is set to make a return, too, and even be involved in the titular *Dreadwolf*'s rise, attempting to manipulate Thedas' future from the shadows. Right now, though, the only dread The Spy feels is for BioWare landing this game successfully, especially considering the real dragon in the room, *Baldur's Gate III*, which appears to loom over *Dreadwolf* like a Fade spectre. Spy out. ■
The Spy

DREADWOLF HAS BEEN ONE OF THE SPY'S TOUGHEST EVER ASSIGNMENTS



THE SPY

The Spy winters at Leliana's villa on the Waking Sea, drinking dandelion wine and singing songs of lost loves.



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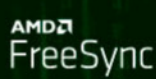
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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



Shiny Shoe's team is distributed, but roughly half come into the downtown San Francisco office.

STACKED DECK

MONSTER TRAIN was a hit, but did that make releasing a new game any easier?

Monster Train, a deckbuilding roguelike that firmly entrenched itself as the crown prince to the kingly *Slay the Spire* back in 2020, was the kind of smash success you might call Champagne Big. Four years later, its successor *Inkbound*'s launch from Early Access was looking more like Sandwich Big.

I'm not just saying that because of the mountain of lamb and aubergines I ate while meeting with developer Shiny Shoe over lunch, to feel out what the aftermath of releasing a game looks like in 2024. I mean, have I thought about that sandwich every day since? Yes. But also, the indie team talked frankly about the struggle of luring *Monster Train*'s audience on board for its next game.

"Had we gone out like *Palworld* I would've greeted you with Dom Pérignon and been like, 'Welcome to Shiny Shoe, I'm already drunk, today's going fantastic,'" jokes CEO and founder Mark Cooke. Instead we get sandwiches and sit in the downtown San Francisco office's meeting room-turned-gym. The half-dozen or so members of Shiny Shoe's hybrid remote team who were in the office had time to go out for lunch, a testament to how well at least one part of the launch was going – no catastrophic day-one bugs needed triaging.

"I'm proud of *Inkbound*, and it seems like it's doing well," Cooke says. "But I want every next game to do better than the last, and I ask myself sometimes, 'is that ever going to be possible?' It's probably not, for almost anybody. But I'm still like, 'I gotta beat *Monster Train*! We gotta do even better...'"

Was a turn-based (but actiony) roguelike set inside fantasy books just a harder sell? *Inkbound* actually started development using a card system that might've felt at home to *Monster Train* fans, but the cards didn't play well with the design Shiny Shoe had in mind, which prioritised fluid, simultaneous inputs from multiple players. And so *Inkbound* launched into the ambiguous zone that so many indie games find themselves in these days: successful? Kinda?

ENEMIES OF SUCCESS

Before launch, Cooke told me that the worst-case scenarios would be a bug or an outage that prevented players from getting into the game, or one that ruined save files (though after Early Access the chances of that were slim). "Those are my top two," he said. "On the business side, maybe if nobody notices or cares about us? That's, financially, probably the worst thing that can happen to us. Apathy."

Inkbound didn't launch to total apathy. It hovered for a few days a respectable distance from the top of the



Watcher relations

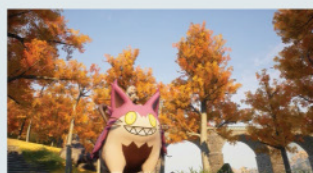
Watchability, not just playability, is an important consideration in 2024. "That was on our mind from the outset in the UI design process," says Mark Cooke. "From a viewer perspective, if you just show up on a screen, if you're familiar with the game already, that we put the icons on the screen you need to get up to speed rapidly with the state of this run."



FAR LEFT: *Inkbound*'s turn-based combat gives you a lot of information to parse.

LEFT: Founder Mark Cooke began his games career as an intern at LucasArts.

2024's INDIE HITS *Four games that have sold at least a million copies on PC in the first half of 2024*



PALWORLD 15M+
Pokémon? Popular. *Guns?* Popular. *Survival games?* Popular. Good call.



BALATRO 1M+
"I don't play poker at all," *Balatro*'s dev said. That turned out to be a strength.



MANOR LORDS 1M+
Where *Cities: Skylines 2* floundered, this chill medieval city-builder struck gold.



ENSHROUDED 2M+
Open-world survival continues to be the most bankable genre on Steam.

Steam charts before sliding down. But its 3,229 peak player count was only about a quarter of what *Monster Train* hit four years ago.

But a smooth launch was still a win worth celebrating for Shiny Shoe's first online multiplayer game, which required the indie studio to learn how to spin up international servers, and support Chinese as well as several other languages they hadn't had in Early Access. There are all sorts of fiddly details that go into a Steam launch we don't normally hear about, and Early Access even adds some extra wrinkles. For example, Shiny Shoe created a dozen new achievements for 1.0 but couldn't test them because adding them to the game would set them live for Early Access players – even though the content attached to those achievements wasn't in the game yet.

"There are tons of metadata changes in the Steam backend for things like localised storage pages, new trailers, new screenshots, new achievements," Cooke says. "We have a new cosmetic supporter pack that invested players who want to support the ongoing development of the game can purchase. There's a ton of buttons to push on all these individual pages to make sure all those assets get uploaded."

From the outside perspective looking at a Steam page, it's hard to distinguish a game like *Monster Train* or *Inkbound* from this year's poker-themed deckbuilding hit *Balatro*, other than the latter's lower price. But the realities behind the scenes are dramatically different: *Balatro*'s £12.79 goes to a single developer after Steam's cut, while

Inkbound's £25 has to support a team of 20 people, an office, and dedicated servers.

"No one buying a game really looks at that – they want something worth their money that's high quality, and it's our job to take our expertise and the number of people we have and make it feel worth it," says creative director Andrew Krausnick.

"But that's on our mind all the time," Cooke adds. "How much fidelity should we be putting into things? With *Inkbound* we went for a lot, for us. It's full 3D, it's got a lot of assets and visual effects. It punches above its weight for a team our size, but at the same time we see *Balatro* doing amazing, and it's made by one person with more modest production values, but it feels polished. It's great."

Given the wave of studio closures that have wracked the industry since 2023, Shiny Shoe is fortunate to have some cushion; it can survive *Inkbound* not setting the world on fire. But it will determine what they do next, and whether the team can keep working on the game it has been dedicated to for the last three years.

"Poker's a good game design analysis of this as well, because you can play right and still lose," says Krausnick. "Part of it is hedging your bets in terms of how you're betting those hands. Skill comes from knowing if you're playing the right odds or not. I think making a game is a lot like that. You're trying to play the right odds, but you put yourself out there – it could be very good, it could find its audience later, it could never find its audience and still be a great game. That's what we think about a lot." ■

Wes Fenlon

I THINK MAKING A GAME IS LIKE THAT. YOU'RE TRYING TO PLAY THE RIGHT ODDS

Secret Level

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF DEVELOPMENT

SOMETHING CLICKED

Unavowed developer **DAVE GILBERT** on the art of designing point-and-click games

Dave Gilbert runs Wadjet Eye Games, which has been making point-and-click adventures since 2006. His development story begins in 2001 as, laid off from a corporate job and looking for a way to get his mind off the horror of 9/11, he discovered the open-source Adventure Game Studio.

Gilbert made a small game in a weekend, and was so excited by the positive response to it that he decided to make more. Another five years or so of making freeware games followed, as did a new job – which he wasn't enjoying. He'd discovered that game development was his true passion. "Eventually I decided that I couldn't envision doing anything else," he says, "and so I took all my savings and decided to just go for it. And I did; 17 years later, I'm still doing it."

He's currently working on the upcoming time-travelling adventure *Old Skies*, and adventure games have seen something of a renaissance in recent years. When Gilbert first dipped his toe into development, however, the release of new games in the genre had slowed to a trickle. This is at least in part because, while most games demand an incredible amount of time and effort to make, point-and-clicks have always been especially demanding. "The thing about adventure games compared to most other kinds of games," he explains, "is that every single piece of them is bespoke. A character picks something up, you animate that one thing for that specific moment. You never see it again." This, along with a much greater emphasis on writing than

most other genres, makes adventure game development lengthy and expensive. Though as Gilbert notes, this allowed indie developers such as himself to fill the gap in the market with smaller overheads and, necessarily, long development times. He starts each new game with the most important question.

"Is it fun? Where's the audience engagement here? There's so many point-and-click games that don't think about that. They think the more puzzles, the more interactions, the better. Whereas I tend to think: 'OK there's a puzzle, but why am I motivated to do this puzzle?'"

Gilbert is aware that he can't make an objective call on his own games,

"When you're so close to it, it's impossible to know for sure. There's always that doubt like, is this fun?". Therefore, he brings in people to feed back at as early a stage as possible, so he can gauge if the game is going in the right direction. "If I can engage a player when it's line art and placeholder dialogue, placeholder everything; if I can engage them at that stage, then I know that I've got something, and then I'll expand on it."

ADVENTURE CAPITALIST

Feedback can push development in bigger ways, too. Gilbert gives the example of KayKay in *Unavowed*, who was originally intended to make only a very brief appearance. Her part was expanded because the feedback revealed that everybody loved her.

When considering adventure games more broadly, there's one advantage that developers enjoy compared to many other genres. "If you create a game with a cool mechanic," says Gilbert, "then it'll get cloned to infinity and your game is no longer special. But if you have good characters and good writing, that's not something you can replicate without making it look like a cheap knockoff."

The unique nature of each adventure game on the market, in fact, is something that Gilbert is keen for people to understand. "A lot of people paint point-and-click adventure games with a very broad brush, but there's so many, it's like saying that all books are the same or all movies are the same. They're all different types of stories, and point-and-click adventure games are just a way of *telling* that story. It all comes down to whether or not you like that story." ■

Luke Kemp

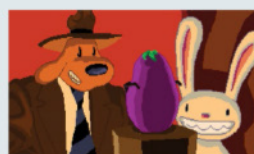
CLICK AND COLLECT

Four more unmissable adventures



THE CURSE OF MONKEY ISLAND

More fun than a rubber chicken with a pulley in the middle.



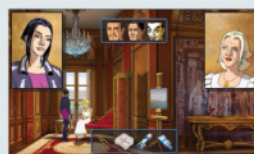
SAM & MAX HIT THE ROAD

Hilarious and unforgettable. But enough about me. *Sam & Max* is pretty good too.



LIFE IS STRANGE

More walk-and-click than point-and-click, but a highlight of the modern adventure game.



BROKEN SWORD

Who could forget George and Nico? We needn't worry about that, as a new game is on the way.



ADVENTURE GAMES HAVE SEEN SOMETHING OF A RENAISSANCE



ABOVE: *Old Skies* will be a more traditional point-and-click adventure.

FAR LEFT: *Shardlight* is a post-apocalyptic adventure where a plague runs riot (released years before COVID-19).



1 month



ELDEN RING: SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE

RELEASE June 20, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** FromSoftware Inc

What's looking like the biggest release of the year, the *Elden Ring* expansion appears to be a must-buy for fans. New enemies, weapons, bosses and more incoming.



FINAL FANTASY XIV: DAWNTRAIL

RELEASE July 2, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Square Enix

The epic new expansion promises a whole new world of adventure, with fresh quests, characters, gear, enemies, loot, activities, jobs and more.



FROSTPUNK 2

RELEASE July 25, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** 11 bit studios

The hit dystopian society survival game *Frostpunk* returns with a bigger and more ambitious sequel. Grim, difficult decisions and deep strategy await the player.

3 months



BLACK MYTH: WUKONG

RELEASE August 20, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Game Science

An action RPG based in a virtual world inspired by Chinese mythology and the story of *Journey to the West*. Play as the Destined One in a visually arresting game.



DUSTBORN

RELEASE August 20, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Red Thread Games

A new adventure game in which gamers are invited to embark on a perilous road-trip across a Divided States of America with a ragtag crew (and a robot driver!).

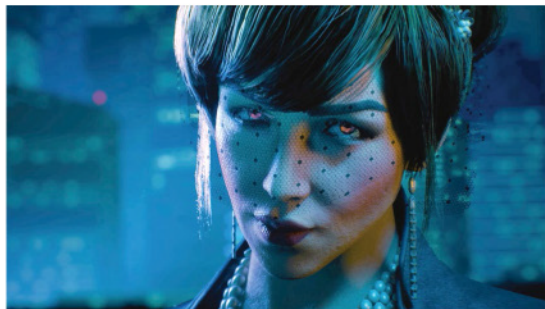


STAR WARS OUTLAWS

RELEASE August 30, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Massive Entertainment

We've now got a fixed launched date for the next big *Star Wars* game. You play as scoundrel Kay Vess in a third-person action-adventure set in the Outer Rim.

6 months



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE Autumn 2024 | DEVELOPER Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, *Bloodlines 2* now rises once more from *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* dev The Chinese Room. Looks promising.



STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

RELEASE September 5, 2024 | DEVELOPER GSC Game World

The long-delayed *STALKER 2* has slipped again to early September this year. But from what we've played so far the wait is going to be well worth it. Keep the faith.



WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

RELEASE September 9, 2024 | DEVELOPER Saber Interactive

Saber Interactive has been given a full extra year to make sure that Titus' return against the relentless Tyranid hordes will be a triumphant one. Fingers crossed it delivers.

12 months+



GTA VI

RELEASE 2025 | DEVELOPER Rockstar Studios

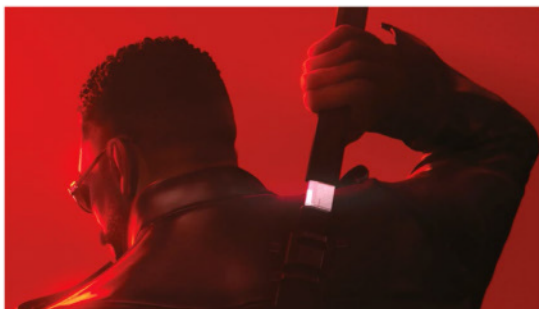
Everything we're hearing right now points to the next *Grand Theft Auto* launching in 2025. But whether or not that includes PC is unknown. Better get saving for a new GPU.



FALLING FRONTIER

RELEASE 2025 | DEVELOPER Stutter Fox Studios

Conquer a vast, procedurally generated star system in this sci-fi RTS in which gathering intel and ensuring efficient logistics are key factors to successfully beating your foes.



BLADE

RELEASE Unknown | DEVELOPER Arkane Lyon

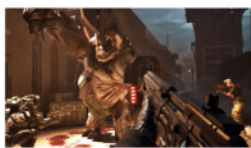
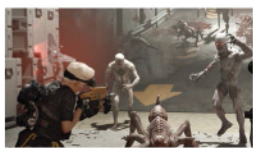
From the talented devs who brought PC gamers both *Prey* and the *Dishonored* series, Marvel's daywalker is set for a mature, singleplayer, third-person adventure game.

HUG IT OUT
Baldur's Gate III gives you plenty of opportunities to talk to your companions, and also many chances to get busy between the sheets with them, too. But what it didn't do, at least until now, is let you hug your companions or paramour. Luckily, the *HUGS* mod by Cerberry fixes that. Grab it here: shorturl.at/cpzP0



PREVIEW

Killing Floor 3



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Tripwire Interactive

PUBLISHER
Tripwire Interactive

LINK
killingfloor3.com

KILLING FLOOR 3

Tripwire Interactive's creature feature is back

The Impaler, the first boss I get to see in *Killing Floor 3*, sets the scene perfectly. Described as equal parts M1 Abrams tank and gorilla, with a giant blade embedded in its face, the first time I see one it's exploding through a door frame and barrelling straight at game director Bryan Wynia.

The first thing I notice is the giant gorilla-tank hybrid charging towards Wynia, obviously. But after that I spot the winking red lights, armoured plates and biomechanical technology. It's not sleek, things look bolted on, welded together. If this is truly the future – *Killing Floor 3*'s biggest twist is the jump to science fiction – then it's more Aliens than Star Trek.

Killing Floor has always been a franchise about mowing down genetic freaks with heavy firepower, but the jump to sci-fi has brought upgrades to evil megacorp Horzine's stable of Zeds. These Zeds are meaner now, with even the simple Clot being given an upgrade to make them intimidating. The xenomorph-ish Crawlers can now crawl along walls to ambush you from all angles, too, but the real terror is the chainsaw-wielding Scraque, who has kept his woodworking tool despite the wealth of new technology and added a grappling hook, all the better to pull you across the map and fillet you with an oversized hedge trimmer.

"It used to be that there were tons of Zeds but they were all very similar in height and so you could just line up heads

and start shooting. It's something players love to do, and it's something we love to do too. But we wanted to increase the danger, and so Zeds are now more like unique challenges, chess pieces that we're serving up to players.

"There are less Zeds now and the pace of combat is a bit slower, but now you'll have to deal with problems like the fact Husks can fly now, and they're shooting down at you from various rooftops."

Individually, those armour plates are covering up a selection of weak spots across the beasts you'll be fighting, and it's a testament to the design of the game that even at this early stage it's easy to read even in frantic firefights, as the metal plates will ricochet bullets, while flesh will get shredded under gunfire.

It's gnarly. Damage persists until monsters finally die. The chaotic firefights, messy gaping wounds and chunky-looking weaponry turn *Killing Floor 3* into a spectator sport, and indeed every few minutes another developer comes in to watch Wynia carve his way through wave after wave or die trying.

EXPRESS TO HELL

Players worried about the franchise making the jump to science fiction needn't be. As mentioned above, the game takes more from sci-fi action like *Predator* or *Aliens* than it does hard sci-fi. "Aliens and *Predator* are really overused reference points," admits Wynia, "but as a kid of the '80s and '90s I loved the Dark Horse Aliens and *Predator* comics and there's one in particular, Aliens: Rogue that really plays into this science gone wrong theme and trying to create biological weapons.

"The other element from those universes is this idea you see with the Colonial Marines, or with Dutch and his men. There's a group of well-trained badasses with all the firepower in the world, and they're barely surviving. That's when *Killing Floor* is at its best, when you've got just a few rounds of ammo left and you're wiping sweat and blood off your brow."

That's the vibe Tripwire Interactive is going for, and it's using these thematic tools available to give players cool toys and give the universe a kick up the behind to introduce new elements. This means

FIRST
LOOK

A FRANCHISE ABOUT MOWING DOWN GENETIC FREAKS WITH HEAVY FIREPOWER



PREVIEW

Killing Floor 3

RIGHT: Unreal Engine 5 makes everything look shinier, even this hideous lad.

BELOW: Well, this probably isn't going to go well.





those upgrades on the now formidable Zeds, new locations around the globe, sentry guns and, yes, even a laser gun. But it's a really cool laser gun. Promise.

As the Zeds get more dangerous, players have new tricks up their sleeves too. The biggest and most controversial change will likely be that specialists – named characters who replace the class system of the previous games – can only buy guns designed for their specialism rather than the earlier 'buy what you want' philosophy of older games.

"Each specialist has a unique set of weapons specific to them," Wynia says. "As Mr Foster, I'm that classic well-rounded Commando, and I'm going to have a variety of assault-type weapons to suit me. This could be anything from a bullpup-type design to something that is almost like an LMG. But those guns are going to be well-suited and kitted-out for him. You go to our Firebug, and she's going to have various flamethrowers, heat and energy-based weapons that work for her."

INSPECTOR GADGETS

While this might feel limiting to *Killing Floor 2* veterans used to having a backpack full of things that go boom, there's a tradeoff. These specialists each get their hands on a gadget, which most players will recognise as being akin to one of *Overwatch*'s Ultimate abilities. I prefer Wynia's description – "the oh shit button" – a piece of equipment that can be unleashed to clear the screen. For Commando Mr Foster this is an acid belching drone that will carve a path through a horde, but my favourite is the Engineer's sound cannons which pop up from your shoulders and let you turn opponents into jam. This power respawns fairly quickly, and in the current iteration you can use it once a round or so.

There are also a range of new movement options, with the ability to use zip lines and ladders letting players freely move around the maps and perfectly complementing what looks like a fairly generous vaulting mechanic, meaning your character seems – at least from this hands off look – to be much more agile than before.

The addition of a weapon modification

system has meant the weapons you have access to can be tweaked to make sure they're working how you want. This is a system I'd want to play with before passing judgement, but items like foregrips, drum mags and optics are all present and correct, in addition to a few more unusual options that I'm excited to take for a spin myself, such as grenade launchers and under-barrel shotguns.

UP THE ARSENAL

"Weapon customisation is a huge addition to *Killing Floor 3*," adds Wynia, "and it's something that our community has wanted for a long time and something we've wanted to add for a long time too. The thing that's awesome is that it allows you to take a gun and play with it the way you want to".

"We're not going to let you redesign the gun: you can't take a shotgun and turn it into a sniper rifle. But if you want to use a sniper rifle and you want something that will allow you to shoot from the hip more? We have mods that allow you to do that. If you want to have a longer-range scope, load the magazine with heavier rounds? We have a set of weapon mods in the game to allow you to play that way."

Wynia adds, "When I'm playing as Mr Foster, his tier-two gun is a really well-rounded type of assault rifle, but when you put an ACOG scope on it, put it on single shot and whack a silencer on it, it kind of blurs the line and allows me to use the weapon in a whole new way."

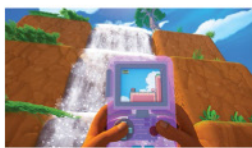
Killing Floor 3 feels like the dials marked gore, carnage and gunplay have been turned up to 11. This *Is Spinal Tap* style. The move to Unreal Engine 5 seems to have empowered the team to make things beautifully gory, and I'm told there are dozens of ways a Zed head can implode after a headshot, but the thing I'm most excited for is the addition of many features that will bring *Killing Floor* into the modern era. Weapon customisation, more complicated fights and even a bigger sense that I'm inheriting a character with meaningful progression as opposed to the more inert specialisations of previous games in the series.

Usually, I come away from hands-off sessions desperate to try the game for myself, but I came away from a couple of days looking at *Killing Floor 3* desperate to rope a few friends in and fight a horde together. I'll be thinking of the bloodstained maps of *Killing Floor 3* until that actually happens.

Jake Tucker

FEELS LIKE THE DIALS MARKED GORE, CARNAGE AND GUNPLAY HAVE BEEN TURNED UP TO 11

Screenbound



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

Mid-to-late 2025 (tentative)

DEVELOPER

Crescent Moon Games

PUBLISHER

Crescent Moon Games

LINK

crescentmoongames.com

SCREENBOUND

How a 5D platformer went viral two months into development

It's kind of a miracle that I'm still around," Crescent Moon Games founder Josh Presseisen tells me. "I had done so many demos and pitched them to so many console publishers – and nothing was working. It was all kind of falling apart, and then *Screenbound* happened."

Screenbound is a new puzzle platformer that merges 2D and 3D gameplay in a dual-dimensional space to create what is being called a 5D experience. Described as *The Witness* meets *Super Mario*, the player moves in first person across a 3D space while controlling a Game Boy-like device – known as a Quantum Boy (Qboy) – with a 2D version of the same character within it.

"It started with the idea of an endless runner, where you're holding a Game Boy looking at the screen and you're running and jumping on both at the same time. But the 2D screen is the Game Boy and it's side-scrolling," explains Presseisen, noting how this particular version didn't make the cut.

Speaking over a video call from New York, he mentions how a game design pivot that aligned closer to the *Mario* formula with defined levels, as well as the ability to move backwards and sideways, became the stepping stone to where *Screenbound* is today. "I had messed around with these ideas for 2D and 3D mixing together, and it seemed somewhat coherent as far as you could actually play it," he says. "But then I got Kyle on board."

FIRST LOOK

Kyle McKeever is *Screenbound*'s sole developer, who took over after the previous main programmer dropped out. The two had previously collaborated after Presseisen discovered McKeever's asset pack on the Unity Store, which led them to create *The Dear God* in 2015, *Hammer Bomb* in 2016 and *Morphite* in 2017.

"When we work together, it's a lot different than other places," McKeever, who is based remotely in Minnesota, says. "We tend to be very creative-focused and just kind of jump in and things will change pretty quickly." This thinking was then applied to *Screenbound*. "We changed things a little bit when we tried some different experiments to make it work better, and the idea was that you could fully explore a world in 3D, but be playing a 2D game at the same time. That was the epiphany we had together," Presseisen says, adding how he didn't think it would work. The internet thought otherwise.

GONE VIRAL

Having begun development on *Screenbound* in January 2024, it would only take two months for the game to receive major attention online. A 27-second video showcasing early gameplay was uploaded to X (formerly Twitter) as part of a #ScreenshotSaturday tag, receiving thousands of likes, retweets and more than 1.5 million views.

This was followed by the perfect social storm that would make the game go viral. First indie developer Rami Ismail shared the clip, before it was then picked up by influencer Jake Lucky and videogame site, Dexerto. This combination then spiralled, culminating in over 100 million views and countless coverage for *Screenbound*. Presseisen and McKeever have had difficulty nailing down the exact numbers from this surge, but liken the snowball effect to that of a Super Bowl ad.

Considering neither had any expectations prior to uploading the clip, the response was mindblowing, "From the very first moment that I posted anything about the game, it just got a lot of interest compared to anything else I've ever posted," recounts Presseisen.

In its first four days of being live, *Screenbound*'s Steam page generated 20,000 Wishlists. That number has more

THIS COMBINATION THEN SPIRALLED, CULMINATING IN OVER 100 MILLION VIEWS



PREVIEW

Screenbound

RIGHT: *Fez* and *Viewfinder* were highlighted for featuring similar elements.

BELOW: Rate my setup.





than doubled since, even if Presseisen prefers not to know. "It's like a superstition thing. I feel like it'll never be enough or it'll never be, I'll be either disappointed or I'll be happy, but I don't want to be either."

NEW GENRE

What sparked people's intrigue was undoubtedly the originality of *Screenbound*. Taking it one step further, the duo now plan to integrate multiple cartridges into the world that introduce different types of gameplay depending on what stage the player is at.

As detailed by Presseisen, "I feel like being able to experience the environment in a more immersive way lends itself well to both of those genres, where you could have a top-down Game Boy *Zelda*-style RPG and then have this gorgeous 3D forest environment in the background that you could navigate at the same time."

Other possible genre switches were horror and a *Metroidvania*. Since the number of cartridges is yet to be locked down the game is very much a work-in-progress. For instance, another idea was that a genre change wouldn't be for every level but instead a mix-up. So one platformer, one platformer mix-up, one RPG, one RPG mix-up, etcetera.

A level editor component (think *Mario Maker*) is being considered too. For now, though, it's simply an internal tool used to create levels. McKeever describes the editor process as taking the "flat pancake" of the 2D space and spreading it out in a 3D space using a custom-built mesh. Whether the level editor is available on launch or is rolled out further down the line is yet to be determined, with the two men being the only full-time staff. Regardless, it was hard not to get caught up in their enthusiasm and ambition for what the finished product could entail.

"We even talked about how this could potentially lead to a new genre of gaming because it's this way of playing two games at the same time and two dimensions that haven't really been done before," says Presseisen. "Just adding these little retro mechanics is cool and all, but another dimension totally changes everything."

The tagline for *Screenbound* is "a game about being distracted", with the

protagonist (whose name is yet to be finalised) fully focused on the action unfolding on the Qboy device. With that in mind, it's easy to think that it's commenting on falling attention spans and smartphone addiction in society. While it's been brought up multiple times, both confirm it was never intentional; instead, they'd rather focus on just making an "interesting game mechanic" that hasn't been seen before.

So, what is the intention? "Breaking Bad meets Alice in Wonderland," they tell me, asking if that makes sense. I answer that it does not. However, I'm very curious to learn more. The story is being headed up by Sasha Presseisen in her debut game, having been studying screenwriting for the last few years. She also happens to be Josh's wife, who found it appealing to have someone with no prior videogame experience take control of the narrative.

"Basically, your mom has a side hustle and that has to do with building, selling and trading quantum parts in this secret market in her garage," he says, highlighting how it's still in the conception phase. "She gets obsessed and finds out some information about the quantum world that is going to break the actual world. From this, she dives into this device and the protagonist has to find her..."

SPAGHETTI MESS

As *Screenbound* is barely four months into its development, at the time of writing, it was exciting to see several of these ideas form or get ironed out during the 90-minute call we shared.

A long road is ahead for Crescent Moon Games. And with a premise that poses, in some ways, limitless possibilities, trying to manage the game's scope while trying to not get overwhelmed by its potential is very much at the forefront of Josh's mind. "We may have to add more artists or more programmers," he says. "What we don't want to create is a spaghetti mess where it's a total mix of a thousand ideas and none of it really works, so we want to make sure that it's all coherent, fun and natural."

Screenbound is set to launch on PC with the intention of bringing the game to all major consoles at some point. The aim is to not "drag it out forever" and have a release date between mid to late 2025, if everything goes according to plan. I'm a little dubious of that timeframe, at least hopeful that when the 5D platformer does arrive, it will be worth the wait.

Matt Poskitt

A LEVEL EDITOR COMPONENT (THINK MARIO MAKER) IS BEING CONSIDERED TOO

PREVIEW

Underspace





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

April 10, 2024 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

Pastaspace Interactive

PUBLISHER

Camlann Games

LINK

tinyurl.com/n37tde7s

UNDERSPACE

Big, weird space adventures and Freelancer nostalgia? Yes please!

It takes a lot to get me immediately invested in a sci-fi universe's backstory and lore, but *Underspace* got its hooks in the moment it recounted the story of The Speaker, a public orator of legend. When interdimensional conquerors threatened the galaxy, his unbroken 46-hour speech shamed the invaders so thoroughly that they turned around and went back home embarrassed. And that's just the tip of an iceberg of weirdness.

Underspace's universe is one where the closest species to 'human' (and the one your initial character belongs to) has 120 sexes, each only compatible with one other. A universe where alcoholic, angry floating crystals are probably going to be your best friends in a fight. Where giant lobsters run the galactic economy because they can tap into a species-wide psychic bulletin board to set trade prices before traders even know there's a demand. It also looks and plays almost exactly like 2003 cult favourite *Freelancer*. So that's a pretty big thing going for it, if an authentically old-school aesthetic isn't a turn-off.

PASS THE HYDROSPANNER

Freelancer nostalgia aside, it's that compelling strangeness (reminiscent of *Star Control*, *Farscape* and even *Lexx* in places) that allowed me to endure *Underspace's* many rough edges. Launched into early access just a few days ago, indie outfit Pastaspace Interactive (a small team including the guy who modded

Thomas the Tank Engine into *Skyrim*) reckon that they've got at least another year of work until they're happy calling this sandbox space shooter/RPG 'finished', and have been keen to manage expectations of what people are getting with this initial release version.

Right now, the core of *Underspace* is finished (the main story, many sidequests and a shocking number of boss fights), but almost everything else feels like a work-in-progress. Voice acting is either absent or synthesised placeholders (including an amusing Tiktak-adjacent robo-voice for the protagonist), bugs are frequent, gamepad controls aren't fully dialled in and balance, performance and mechanics are a ways off from being finalised. If any of that sounds like a dealbreaker, feel free to drop this one on your wishlist and come back once it's closer to being done.

That said, I'm probably going to be playing more *Underspace* once I've finished writing this, because I've a high tolerance for jank and there's some very solid bones here. Plus, maybe I'm a bit more nostalgic for *Freelancer* than I'd like to admit to myself. While the excellent *Everspace 2* is a good point of reference for a similar, recent game, this is more old-school. You've got a beat-up old spaceship, no reputation and a handful of cash, and are set loose on the universe to sink or swim through either trading, fighting, smuggling or (more intriguingly) monster-slaying.

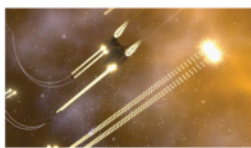
NO SPACE, NO PROBLEMS

Either by following the main story or going hunting for interdimensional storms (heralded by cosmic lightning illuminating impossibly vast tentacles in the distant space-fog), it's not hard to find boss battles in *Underspace*. Giant space serpents, weird crystal constructs, massive robots with giant beam lasers and other Big Things will try to eat, blast or crush you as you dodge-barrel-roll around their attacks. They're a fun change of pace from the basic dogfighting with smaller enemies, where you'll spend most of your time trying to pin down highly evasive targets with your fully gimbaled guns.

As with *Freelancer* (and *Everspace*), the default control method here is mouse and keyboard, with a gamepad setup

BIG THINGS WILL TRY TO EAT, BLAST OR CRUSH YOU AS YOU DODGE-BARREL-ROLL AROUND

Underspace



✦ currently only half baked and due to be finalised. This is more *Diablo In Space* than *Star Citizen*, with your guns firing towards your free-floating cursor and random elite enemies cropping with modifiers and better loot. You level up, assign stats and gear up your ships with an assortment of basic lasers or hotkeyed modules for orbital drones, mines, missiles and gadgets. No joystick, HOTAS or complex energy management here, just lasers, loot and a lot of travelling.

THEM'S THINKIN' WORDS

Another element separating this from *Freelancer* (and most of its other peers) is that once you land on a space station or planet, you're able to walk around in first-person, chatting with NPCs and quest-givers in multi-choice dialogues. They're a surprisingly well-written and chatty bunch, each species having their own quirks, but individuals are treated as such rather than archetypes even when they're strange microscopic critters piloting floating robot tables. Despite some old-school chunky graphics (this is

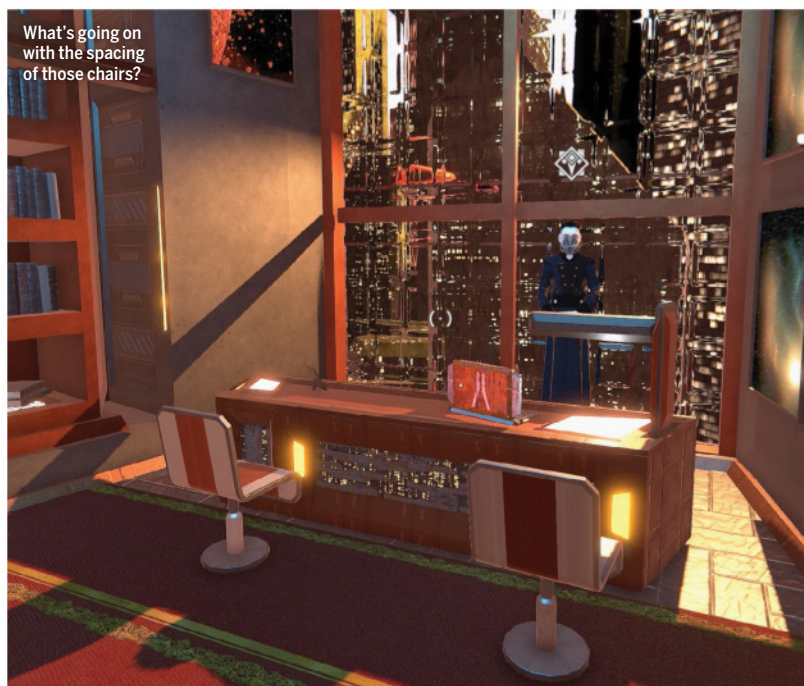
Indie with a capital I), it goes a long way to selling the fiction of this strange universe and its many oddball inhabitants.

Even the codex – source of most of the lore and explanations – is entertaining to read, being written in an informal 'OK, here's what you need to know and what I personally think' tone that reminded me of *Brigador*'s surprisingly compelling unlockable text. It's just a pity that outside of the codex, very little of the writing is finalised, and most of the voice-acting at present is either amateur or synthesised placeholders. Again, if you're expecting immersion, you might want to wait for this one to sit in the oven a bit longer.

One other notably Early Access-ish element of the game is the performance. Despite the game not looking much prettier than its 21-year-old inspiration, it made my laptop (an HP Omen with an RTX 3070) creak a bit in places. Not a dealbreaker for me, but it's one more rough edge to deal with. I'm only a handful of hours into what the developers estimate is a 16-hour main story (and dozens more exploring and sidequesting) and I'm excited to see more. A load screen just teased the existence of colossal monsters that wear entire space stations as camouflage, like a space-city-sized hermit crab. I wonder what kind of loot one of those will drop.

Dominic Tarason

NO JOYSTICK, HOTAS OR COMPLEX ENERGY MANAGEMENT HERE





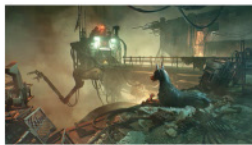
ABOVE: When you land on a station or planet you can walk around it in first-person perspective.

LEFT: *Underspace* looks and plays a lot like *Freelancer*. That's good, very good.



PREVIEW

The Forever Winter



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Fun Dog Studios

PUBLISHER
Fun Dog Studios

LINK
tinyurl.com/pmr28ex

THE FOREVER WINTER

A scavenger trying to survive in a war between mechs

The *Forever Winter* is not your typical looter shooter power fantasy. You're a nobody. A desperate scavenger looting corpses while titanic machines conduct a war that's consumed the world. You're not trying to fight them; you're just trying to survive, and bring what you scavenge back to regular folk who are hiding from the devastation.

First announced with a grim cinematic trailer in February this year, developer Fun Dog has now given us our first proper look at its post-apocalyptic nightmare, with its miserable scavengers scurrying between burning, monolithic structures and looting the detritus of a fallen civilisation – all under the shadow of huge mechs fighting their never-ending war. The gameplay trailer does not paint a pretty picture of the future.

"[*The Forever Winter*] was largely inspired by the opening scene in *Terminator 2* and the future horror scenes in the first *Terminator*," says Miles Williams, Fun Dog Studios' CEO and creative director. "But if we go back even further, there was actually much more inspiration from RTS titles, where it was the OGs like *Dawn of War* or *Command & Conquer*. I remember spending thousands of hours basically building up armies in these different games"

This is not a game full of heroics. While the four-player squads will face androids and even some human infantry that they'll be able to take down, one of those huge mechs is going to easily be able to wipe

them out – and they're facing not one but two armies full of these seemingly insurmountable challenges.

BIGGER FISH

The two warring factions don't really care about your group of survivors at first, though. They're busy with the war, with dynamic objectives playing out as you do your own thing. You won't be encountering random mobs of enemies that spawn in to give you something to fight; instead you'll encounter organised fire teams on missions. Maybe you'll bump into some APCs on patrol, or a clash of the titans with gargantuan mechs tearing chunks out of each other. And, notes Williams, "sometimes crazy shit happens where it has unintended consequences".

Every enemy has hitpoints, but they also could have reactive armour, stealth systems and all sorts of countermeasures, so a ragtag group of survivors ain't going to stand a chance when the factions wheel out the big boys. If you do bump into one of the behemoths, you're just going to have to hope you're not noticed.

"So for him, his POV is like he's more of like a Godzilla/King Kong type unit," says Williams. "We're not trying to create a situation where you're just plugging away at the [weak spots] on the boss. This thing got deployed

for a specific reason, which means the lethality of the thing that it got deployed against is up here, and we're talking like street-destroying heavy ordnance that will suck the oxygen out of the immediate AOE and immediately kill you."

ESCAPING CHAOS

Encountering an enemy force you don't stand a chance against doesn't automatically spell death, though. If you run into a tough squad you know you won't be able to deal with, but you know the enemy faction is nearby, you might be able to draw them into a confrontation, letting you escape in the chaos. Maybe you'll stick around on the periphery, waiting for the victor to be revealed, and then you can pounce on them while they're battle weary. Stealth and smart plays are your strongest weapons.

But as much as there are still ways for you to feel like a badass, that might not necessarily be a good thing. The more

STEALTH AND SMART PLAYS ARE YOUR STRONGEST WEAPONS



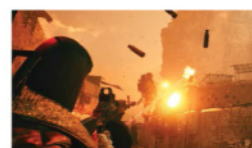
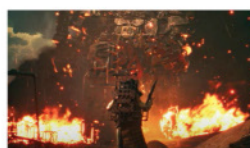
PREVIEW

The Forever Winter

RIGHT: Defending PC Gamer Towers against console gamer invasion requires serious hardware.

BELOW: The bookies would not give you good odds of survival.





noise you make and the more successful you are, the more the machine factions will consider you a threat.

"If we can basically get the player to survey an area, take a moment, and not immediately shoot at everything that they see, that's a W for us," says Williams. Scouting and doing threat assessments is going to be paramount. You'll want to pick routes with lots of cover, rather than rushing into "that open stretch of no-man's land with a bunch of crosses and dead robots in it".

HOLSTER IT

Williams admits that it might be tough to teach players not to use their weapons at the drop of a hat. Decades of gaming has taught us that, if we see an enemy and we have a gun, we put as many bullets in it as we can. But here, your guns are defensive countermeasures – you're using them to protect yourself and your team when you don't have any other options.

On the subject of your team, Fun Dog isn't ready to reveal how each character works, but Williams does confirm that you'll be picking from a cast of survivors that each have their own playstyle. When you die in a mission you lose all your loot, but you still get XP, giving you constant progression – but that progression doesn't equate to becoming more and more powerful. The stuff you unlock gives you more options, more utility, giving you a sense of growth.

Then there's the world progression. The factions will react not just to what you're doing in a mission, but what you've been doing in previous ones. So if you do something that really messes up one faction's plans, you might find they've deployed some units to hunt you down to get revenge, or sectors will become more dangerous as factions lock it down.

"Because we hit the supply chain, this boss got killed," Williams offers as an example. "Now that other army controls that sector completely. And on paper, it's like, well, you got batteries, or you got whatever you wanted from that particular unit, and your people are OK, but now you're fucked if you go to that sector."

Similarly, your actions are going to have an impact on the rest of the survivors

– the people you're trying to help. If you did something that got thousands of people killed, vendors back home might be understandably a bit upset, jacking up their prices as a result. So even if you survive and grab lots of loot, there might be some unpleasant consequences.

It's exciting stuff, and this persistency is something Fun Dog wants to expand on post-launch as well, but Williams is also wary of over-promising. It's easy to forget, given the flashiness of the trailers and the ambitious nature of the team's plans, that this is still a small developer. "We're trying not to promise something that we can't deliver at our team size," he says. "So I'm very much leaning into like, yeah, we think this is cool. And yes, we want to expand on it over time as we build out the world."

WAR IS HELL

This big picture stuff has absolutely piqued my interest, but really I'm just eager to play a looter shooter where I'm terrified. The trailer really goes all out, hammering home how brutally grim the situation is. There are shades of Warhammer 40k, but it equally calls to mind images of the total devastation wrought by modern real-world conflicts. The team interviewed veterans, including friends of Williams who came back from the Iraq War, and that's where the emphasis on "consequences and tangible stakes" comes from.

Williams mentions *Lethal Company* a couple of times, and while *The Forever Winter* is a very different proposition to the lo-fi scavenger hunt, it showed how much fun can be had by making players vulnerable and forcing them to constantly juggle their desire for more loot with the horrible knowledge that death could be lurking around every corner. Every minute of it puts you in a position where you have to make difficult decisions and maintain full situational awareness.

That's what *The Forever Winter* is offering, too, but obviously with a greater emphasis on stealth and tactics. You're getting one of your team to hang back and provide cover, huddled behind a burned out vehicle with their grenade launcher at the ready; another to search the area for loot, hoping they don't find a hostile machine instead; and another ready to create a loud distraction so the rest of you can flee if a mech appears, so at least some of you survive – like a horror-themed *Ghost Recon*. And that is very much something I want in my life.

Fraser Brown

YOU'LL BE PICKING FROM A CAST OF SURVIVORS THAT EACH HAVE THEIR OWN PLAYSTYLE

Test Drive Unlimited Solar Crown



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Sep 12, 2024

DEVELOPER
KT Racing

PUBLISHER
Nacon

LINK
testdriveunlimited.com

TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED SOLAR CROWN

Testing out Test Drive before it drives into testing territory

There's a sense that developer KT Racing assembled this new instalment of the long-running *Test Drive* series by throwing a handful of darts at a mindmap of Steam store tags. It's open-world and live-service. It's for both simulation lovers and arcade racers. It is competitive, but also social.

FIRST LOOK

'Conventional' is another apt descriptor of this racing game. Although don't call it that in front of KT Racing. *Test Drive Unlimited Solar Crown*, the developer is keen to insist, isn't a 'racing game' but a 'driving game'. The idea being that its faithful reproduction of Hong Kong Island isn't merely a 600km box in which to take laps around city streets and practice your handbrake turns on off-road mountain bends, but a space for car enthusiasts to

admire the lovingly recreated Bugattis, BMWs and, er, Nissans.

Much is made of their accurate looks, engine sounds and handling, and from the moment you're asked to choose a starter car, you're encouraged to open their doors, wind down the windows and try their plush leather interior. Gearheads will enjoy swapping around intakes, camshafts, flywheels, suspension systems, rims and windscreens, and while it's all depicted through simple selection menus, you're encouraged to explore the upgrades regularly, including before each race when you're given a moment to swap around parts to suit its track and locale.

PACE CAR

In practice, *Solar Crown* is another multiplayer open-world racing game with the usual glut of game modes: Circuits are multi-lap, eight-player races. Time Attack challenges you to set the fastest time

against other players. Sprint is essentially a do-over of Circuits but with added checkpoints to stop you cutting corners. And Domination rewards you points based on your position in the race every time you cross a checkpoint.

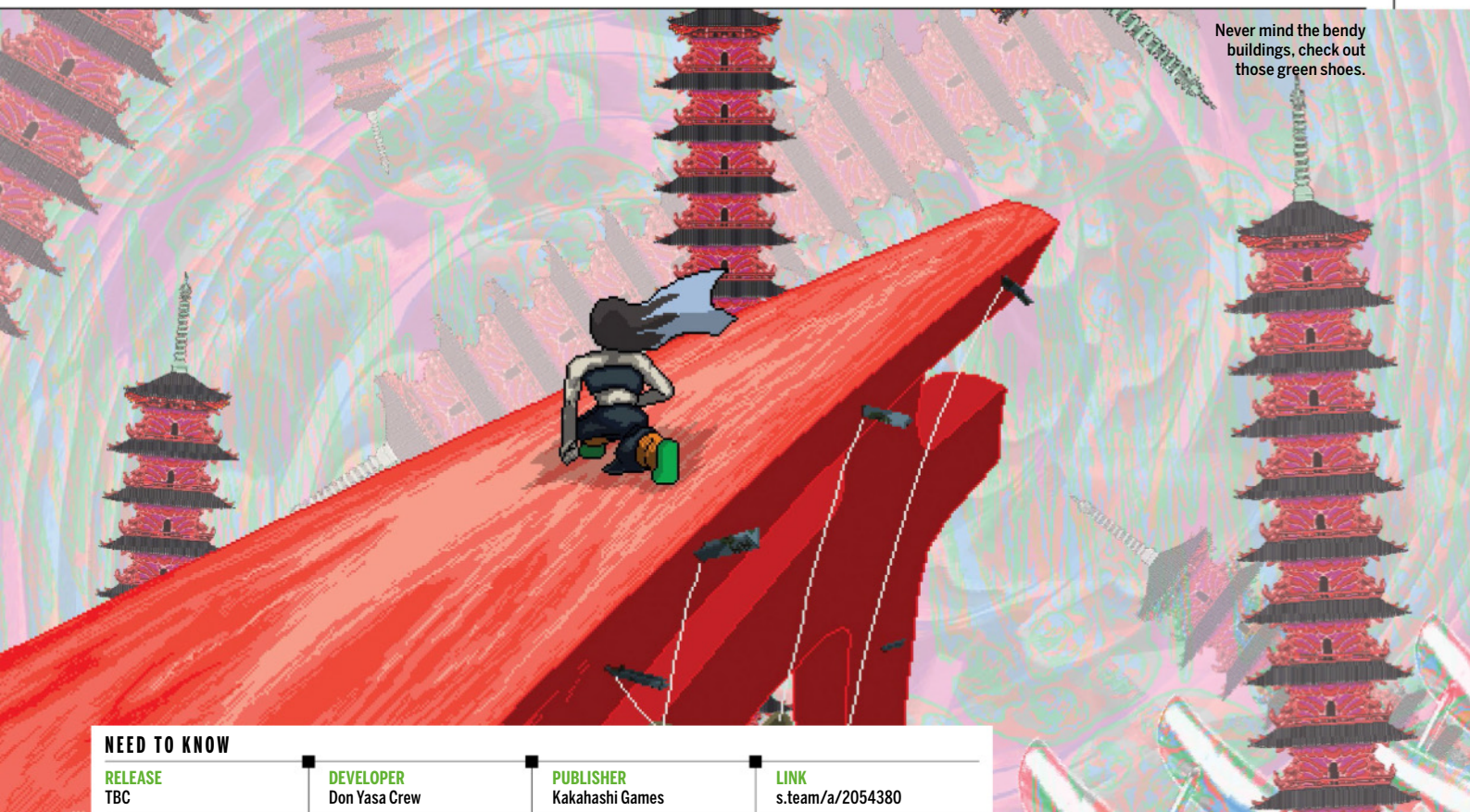
Realism isn't so important that you can't cling to the accelerator for much of a race. Drifting will be a breeze for racing enthusiasts, and as oblique as it always is for everyone else. Driving mastery can be measured at a glance by how dented your car looks by the end of each race.

In other words, don't expect *Solar Crown* to lap the current frontrunners of videogame racing. Though that's perhaps not the intention. With KT Racing planning to support *Solar Crown* with more modes, cars and miscellaneous content in the future, the developer seems to be pinning the game's future as a live service title on its broad, if slightly tame, appeal.

Callum Bains



The whole of Hong Kong Island is open for driving.

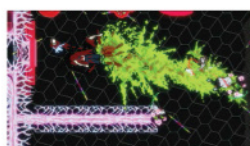


NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
Don Yasa CrewPUBLISHER
Kakahashi GamesLINK
s.team/a/2054380

SONOKUNI

Time-bending sudden death from Japan



Sonokuni knows that you're going to die a lot, and it does its best to help you. It drops hints all the time, not only introducing various actions during an in-game tutorial, but whenever it's restarting after a death too. "Here are the tools," it says. "Why aren't you using them properly?"

PLAYED
IT

The game is viewed from a top-down perspective in a similar vein to a bullet hell shooter, but instead of flying a spaceship you're an assassin. Tasked with raiding a hostile nation's biotech-enhanced forces, you smash through what appear to be ruby bars into some sort of towering pagoda with a glass floor through which you can see... bones? Piles of wires leading to giant decapitated deer heads lay around, and the walls look like they're growing roots or fungal tendrils.

Then things start getting weird. From the very beginning of the game the

sound of rewinding tape can be heard, a hint at the time-control powers you'll eventually use to avoid being hit. Enemies can take you down with a single blow, so being able to dodge around them, enter slow-motion, put up a shield to block their shots, and get to them quickly enough for a slash before they can stab you is key.

The bad guys are holed up in rooms, and don't attack until you enter, giving you precious time to plan your attack. As you're mainly a melee fighter, it becomes a case of working out the most efficient route around each arena, then diving in and seeing if it works. A lot of the time it won't, as there's often something you didn't account for – the enemies who target you with a purple beam that gets

narrower, acting as a timer before they impale you on a red harpoon, prove particularly tricky.

THE COLOUR OF DOOM

The art style is low-res but extremely colourful, and the smears and splatters left over when you take out a bunch of goons – or possibly scientists, given that they're wearing white coats – give the impression of explosions of green blood. The game I played came with a note that things in it, such as the font the lettering is displayed in, could change, but I hope the more bizarre aspects of the game's setting – such as the bright pink Kirby-like creature that looms in from the bottom corner – will stay, as they give the game a lot of character.

Don Yasa Crew is a seven-person hip-hop collective in the time they're not making videogames, something reflected in the soundtrack and its use of samples. There's a demo of *Sonokuni* available on Steam that takes you up to the first boss, and its pixelated violence is an interesting take on the hack and slash genre.

Ian Evenden

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LEADING TO GIANT
DECAPITATED DEER
HEADS LAY AROUND**



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THY KINGDOM COME

SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE is the culmination of decades of FromSoftware RPGs, and a gargantuan finale for **ELDEN RING**

By Wes Fenlon

Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree



Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree

ven when you reach the heart of FromSoftware in glittering western Tokyo, the studio behind *Elden Ring* holds tight to its secrets. Tantalisingly close, beyond a door my guest keycard won't unlock, its developers are putting the final touches on expansion *Shadow of the Erdtree* after more than two years. After playing it for seven hours straight and felling three brutal bosses, I can't believe how little it feels like I've seen of this new doomed realm. According to *Elden Ring*'s director, its one and

only expansion was always destined to be a colossus.

Hidetaka Miyazaki has a cold bottle of water in front of him. He wears long sleeves despite the looming summer heat outside. He does not have a watch. He keeps his phone politely ensconced in its wallet-style case, but I can tell by the thickness it's the snazzy type that unfolds into a small tablet. None of these small details reveal much about the president of FromSoftware, who rarely divulges much about the cryptic stories of his games and even less about himself.

"We think the DLC will provide some supplementary information and some extra ideas. We wouldn't necessarily call them answers, but something that will stir the player's imagination in regards to the base game even more," he says slyly.

There's a gold ring on Miyazaki's left hand, the only hint at the private life he'll be heading home to late tonight. After tending to what was almost certainly more important business until 5 o'clock, he has our

1 The cirque blades held by this nightmare fuel enemy are one of *Erdtree*'s new weapon types.

2 This axe is longer than mine :(



HALLOWED GROUND

Preparing to die in one of *Shadow of the Erdtree*'s new locations



What is it about bosses and lurking in the remnants of circular arenas?

A stake of Marika right next to the site of grace? I don't like this church.

Shadow of the Erdtree emphasises verticality in the open field and in dungeons.

Sure would be nice to rest at that site of grace...



THERE'S A STUNNING VISTA TO GAWP OVER AT LEAST ONCE AN HOUR

interview standing between him and the end of the day – or perhaps, given his famous work ethic in a country known for its long hours, I'm just a miniboss standing between him and more quality time in his office, and not a particularly imposing one next to the *Erdtree* boss that just killed me a dozen times by flattening me with a gigantic magical moon.

My attacks are, at best, grapefruit-sized. Perhaps because we've finally reached the end of a journey that started in 2017, though, Miyazaki is more talkative than I expected.

"At the very outset there were a lot of possibilities, but one of the things that was determined very early on was that size. We wanted that sense of scale for this map, because we wanted an experience for the player

that was going to match that of the base game. We wanted them to experience that sense of discovery, and that sense of wonder and exploration again. We needed a map that was going to uphold that."

He says that *Erdtree's* story was actually planned as a part of *Elden Ring*, but "around halfway through development" they realised it wasn't going to fit. And so the makings of an expansion following Miquella, the brother of infamously deadly hidden boss Malenia, began to take shape. I'll leave the exhaustive deep dive into the lore to others, but my takeaway from a day-long journey into The Land of Shadow in search of Miquella is this: the most powerful god in *Elden Ring's* pantheon is having a Bad Time.



2

VIOLENT CARTOGRAPHER

Shadow of the Erdtree's new map plays all of FromSoftware's greatest hits with new instruments and a booming mix. There's a stunning vista to gawp over at least once an hour, fields and canyons and castles all vogueing to be the centrepiece of a fantasy paperback cover. There are enough new enemies and twists on old ones to come across as a bit of a flex, or an assurance that this isn't just more of the exact same world you've already explored. Towering giants comprised of eternally burning bodies roam the land and shrug off my first tentative attacks like I'm tossing pebbles instead of barrages of glintstone magic; fleeing from one, I run headlong into a cemetery filled with a whole new type of horrible



**THE BLACKGOAL
KNIGHT TORE
THROUGH MY 43
VIGOR WITH A
SINGLE HELLISH
VOLLEY OF FLAMING
CROSSBOW BOLTS**



1 The Land of Shadow was the victim of "a war unseen," which has seemingly left its denizens worse for wear.

2 Belurat, one of the first keeps you'll encounter, blurs the line between legacy dungeon and open field.

3 Think anyone's at home?

Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree



☹️ zombified bird. Sorcery, thankfully, is more effective against them.

I'm immediately smitten with two of *Shadow of the Erdtree's* new weapons, which come from a set of eight wholly new archetypes rather than slotting into the existing arsenals of straight swords and axes and the like. My favourite is the Milady, a fast-swinging light greatsword with a graceful two-hit heavy attack that swoops forward with a calligrapher's flourish. A throwing dagger that magically reappears in my hand after every attack fits my eventual faith-focused build even better, letting me keep my distance from all the scary new enemies without burning through all my spell flasks hurling lightning.

Even coming in with a level 120 character, *Shadow of the Erdtree* is hard. There's a mausoleum 30 seconds from the start that holds an optional boss, the Blackgoat Knight, who tore through my 43 Vigor with a single hellish volley of flaming crossbow bolts. After a few instant deaths from full health I took him to

ABOVE: This same thorny affliction happens to a giant creature during a boss fight and caught me very much by surprise

be FromSoftware's version of a "You're not in Kansas any more" sign, a classical open-world technique indicating there will be challenges in the Land of Shadow to return to after 10 or 20 hours and face down after steeling yourself with its new levelling system.

While you still gain runes as normal, a single stat increase means little against these endgame-tuned enemies. Throughout the expansion you'll find Scadutree Blessings, items you can cash in at a site of grace to increase your attack and defence solely in the Land of Shadow (fast travel back to the Lands Between is always available from the map screen, but the buffs won't be active there).

Some Scadutree Blessings come from defeating bosses, but others are scattered across the open field, usually near glimmering crosses that spawned from Miquella's godly footsteps. At each one he's surrendered a body part – an eye here, an arm there – which his followers are eager to find and (I think?) worship. I don't know what he's going to look like when I finally find him, but I have a feeling it'll make Malenia's Scarlet Rot (a skin condition so nasty it turned the entirety of Caelid into a rotting red pustule) look like a mild case of rosacea. Marika's brood is one seriously cursed family, man.

The ethereal grandeur of *Shadow of the Erdtree* in many moments, though, brought to mind my favourite quote of Miyazaki's, when he told *Dark Souls* (and *Elden Ring*) artist Masanori Waragai to depict an undead dragon not with maggots, but

to instead "convey the deep sorry of a magnificent beast doomed to a slow and possibly endless descent into ruin". His ethos as a director remains unchanged nearly 15 years later.

"That's something I've tried to maintain with *Elden Ring*," Miyazaki says. "I think what I'm trying to do is depict something beautiful, at the end of the day. How you interpret beautiful is obviously in the eye of the beholder; it doesn't necessarily have to be something physically charming or outwardly beautiful. It can be something inside that lets you empathise with them on a deeper level. To be realistic, I feel something beautiful needs something ugly – something that's depraved or tragic to heighten and embolden that beauty. Something that's just plainly, outwardly always beautiful doesn't have a sense of reality to me. I like to try to create something beautiful within that tragedy."

BOILING POINT

The staggering size of *Elden Ring's* world represented a breakthrough for FromSoftware, both in the freedom it offered and the players it attracted. Selling more than 23 million copies is testament to that fact, as is the company's gleaming new office (or at least the one hallway I'm allowed to see, which is lined with trophies celebrating From games). These digs, I'm told, are noticeably less drab than the Shibuya tower where *Elden Ring* was developed, and were needed to house a team that's grown in just the last couple of years.

Shadow of the Erdtree reflects the ambition that's growing

WAYWARD WARRIORS

Meet *Shadow of the Erdtree's* expanded cast



MIQUELLA THE KIND

Malenia's brother, whose hand is seen in this cocoon in the chambers of Mohg. Miquella has abandoned his body to travel to the Land of Shadow.



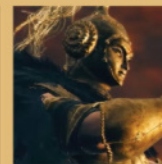
MESSMER THE IMPALER

Seemingly the villain of the expansion, who hates Miquella: "Those stripped of the grace of gold shall all meet death, in the embrace of Messmer's flame."



LADY LEDA

A mysterious knight who beseeches you to follow Miquella into the Land of Shadow. What are her motives? Right now we don't know, but it will be tons of fun finding out.



REDMANE FREYJA

A follower of Leda and Miquella, who will lend you her strength in some of the expansion's boss fights. Her quest progresses alongside yours in *Erdtree*.

COVER FEATURE

Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree

alongside the company – it's an expansion bigger than some entire RPGs, yet also has a far denser and more intricate map than *Elden Ring's* The Lands Between. Sheer cliffs carve off plateaus you can see but can't reach without tracing the path of a craggy slope to a possible hidden incline. What promises to be a path towards another useful map fragment turns out to be a misty valley hiding a catacomb.

"What we tried to achieve this time is something that's not quite open field and not quite legacy dungeon, but something that kind of blends the two together and creates that better sense of verticality," Miyazaki says. "While you do have the large open field

area, we wanted to not just capture the sense of scale and granularity, but the sense of variety as well. We tried to add to the variety of how we space out and structure the open field and legacy dungeons."

Challenges smaller than a *Dark Souls* level but much more elaborate than a basic enemy outpost feel more naturally placed within the Land of Shadow. A frigid mini-dungeon I stumble into even offers some delicious lore for appreciators of *Elden Ring's* jar warriors, showing prisoners chained up over bottomless chasms, being melted to pulp inside the corked containers. "Oh please, not the jar... Anything but that!" cries the spirit of one stuck in jammy purgatory.

2



3



1

**SHEER CLIFFS CARVE
OFF PLATEAUS YOU
CAN SEE BUT CAN'T
REACH WITHOUT
TRACING THE PATH
OF A CRAGGY SLOPE**

1 The dramatic lighting in FromSoftware's front hallway manages to make ductwork look cool.

2 Miyazaki deep in thought as I ask him about his favourite story arc in dark fantasy manga *Berserk*.

3 FromSoftware's office building in western Shinjuku has presence.

4 *Dark Souls* boss Gravelord Nito watches over me while I demo *Shadow of the Erdtree*. Surprisingly chill in person.

5 A pristine collection of the fantasy series that put FromSoftware on the map.

6 BAFTAs, piles of Game Awards, and Steam GOTY trophies line two lengthy display cases.



4



5



6

COVER FEATURE

Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree



1 Perhaps the victim of some terrible grafting? I don't forgive him for throwing lightning at me.

2 Despite being more compact than *The Lands Between*, this expansion constantly manages to make you feel tiny.

“MAKING A GAME AS LARGE AND AMBITIOUS AS ELDEN RING WAS OBVIOUSLY NOT WITHOUT ITS TROUBLES”



30 YEARS OF FANTASY

FromSoftware has used sword & sorcery again and again as the basis for RPGs



KING'S FIELD 1994
FromSoftware's debut game, a first-person fantasy dungeon crawler following in *Ultima Underworld's* armoured footsteps.



SHADOW TOWER 1998
A twist on *King's Field*, this dungeon crawler makes equipment durability and a finite resource economy major strategic concerns.



ETERNAL RING 2000
Not to be confused with *Elden Ring*, this first-person crawler was more or less *King's Field* with a heavier emphasis on magic.



SWORD OF MOONLIGHT: KING'S FIELD MAKING TOOL 2000
From's first PC game was actually a dungeon crawler campaign-making tool.



EVERGRACE 2000
A poorly localised PlayStation 2 launch game that gets little discussion today, even among loyal FromSoft devotees.

Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree

Before getting a taste of *Shadow of the Erdtree*, I hoped that FromSoftware's next game would return to the more intimate structure of *Sekiro* or *Dark Souls* – as much as I loved *Elden Ring*, I found the space between its most interesting encounters and the repetition of some enemies and bosses ultimately exhausting. But *Erdtree* may represent a path forward, one that makes fuller use of its scale despite just two years of development.

Miyazaki says that “making a game as large and ambitious as *Elden Ring* was obviously not without its troubles,” pointing to the longer-than-intended development time. But he says it was also “extremely fun,” and recapturing that experience with FromSoft's next game has him visibly jazzed.

“Every time there's things that go well and things that don't go so well. Taking those bits that didn't go so well this time with *Elden Ring* and incorporating those and improving those in a future title – that's something I'm really excited for.”

Though Miyazaki didn't work at FromSoftware when the company first made its name with the awkward-yet-evocative *King's Field* series of PlayStation dungeon crawlers, I can't help but see *Elden Ring* as the culmination of 30 years of steady iteration, the awkwardness steadily dropping away while the action gets better and better. It's a small thing, but thinking back to the deliberately pokey combat of *Dark Souls*, I'm shocked by how Capcom-esque the animation on my light greatsword's Wing Pose Ash of War is. Holding the trigger puts me into a graceful wuxia-inspired pose with sword arm outstretched. I wait,

wait... then release (!) and spring into an aerial somersault, twirling forward with a diving strike. It feels so good I want to use it over and over, timing my dive to just clear the top of an enemy's lunge.

If *Sekiro* hadn't already made it clear, FromSoftware's ready to be mentioned in the same breath as Capcom or Platinum, and it's gotten there while also inching each of its RPGs towards fully embodying an 1980s dungeon master's teenage dreams. “You might say that trying to capture that excitement of those old tabletop games and game books was one facet of making *Elden Ring*,” says Miyazaki. “But I think more than anything it's just my personal preference when it comes to RPGs and exploring fantasy worlds, so you might see some of my personal idiosyncrasies come into play. I'm still in the process of making my ideal fantasy RPG. While *Elden Ring* is not quite it, it's pretty close. It's getting close.”

Five or six hours into *Shadow of the Erdtree* I conquered the second major boss and made my way into a whole new region of the map. It was an accelerated version of ringing *Dark Souls*' second bell of awakening: that moment where you've sweated and struggled and then realise: that was just the warm up to the rest of the game.

To the casual eye *Shadow of the Erdtree* may seem a bit like more of the same, FromSoftware just continuing to do its dark fantasy schtick. In this second generous map zone, you won't be shocked to find a dragon wreaking havoc and a festering swamp to ride through while holding your nose. But the intricacy of this map is going to get people talking the way

Dark Souls' Lordran did so many years ago. The placements of enemies is designed to keep you on your toes, punish complacency and even outthink veteran players who think they know which corners to watch for traps. If *Elden Ring* was an ambitious double album, so overstuffed with great songs (and the occasional Why Don't We Do It In The Road), this expansion is the tighter follow-up that makes everyone throw up their hands and say, well, by god, they've done it again.

Or maybe this whole album thing's way off base. Hoping for just one more sliver of insight into the man who leads FromSoftware, I ask Miyazaki about his penchant for cooking and spicy food, which he's talked about as both an analogy for his famously difficult games and as one of his few passions outside work. No strokes of genius for *Elden Ring* came to him while he was in the kitchen – cooking is one of the only times he's able to completely take his mind off work. But sometimes he brings his chef's brain to the office with him.

ELDEN RING IS A STEW

“I enjoy making a stew, because the more you cook something down, the more it boils down, the more it releases the flavour,” Miyazaki says. “You can't really get it wrong with the ingredients: you just keep adding to it, keep boiling it, and it gets richer and richer. I think this was my approach in general to *Elden Ring*... [*Shadow of the Erdtree*] is spicy, but it looks extremely appetising. It's glowing from the bowl and makes you think, ‘Maybe I could eat this one, even if I'm not such a fan of spicy food.’” ■

FAR LEFT: There must be a secret to taking down these flaming giants, because they have tons of health.



LOST KINGDOMS 2002

A card battler RPG for the GameCube. Not to be confused with *Darkened Skye*, which lets you cast magic using Skittles.



OTOGI 2003

This action game pulling from Japanese mythology is one of a few FromSoft fantasy games that's not an RPG. In it, you fight demons and save Japan.



ENCHANTED ARMS 2006

From's stab at a conventional turn-based Japanese RPG. It did not quite win over the *Final Fantasy* audience.



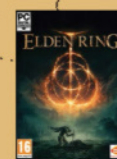
DEMON'S SOULS 2009

Miyazaki took over directing this action RPG, and its difficulty and opaque systems created a sleeper hit.



DARK SOULS: PREPARE TO DIE EDITION 2012

The cries of PC gamers were answered with this. Despite shortcomings, it was a huge hit.



ELDEN RING 2022

FromSoft's biggest RPG is also its most approachable. PC Gamer's 2022 GOTY, the open-world game is one of the greatest of all time.

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READ 'EM AND WEEP

One Dragonborn's epic quest
to become **BALDUR'S GATE III's**
foremost librarian

By Emma Withington

Obsidian's day wasn't going well. Barely escaping a Nautiloid after becoming infected with a Mind Flayer parasite was one thing. Being interrupted in her singular mission to build Faerûn's greatest ever library in Baldur's Gate? Devastating. She possesses power and wit, but this Dragonborn sorcerer didn't sign up for a hero's quest.

I am a filthy hoarder, in and out of videogames. Encumbered is my middle name. If a game has collectable books, I'm doomed. So, I decided to channel this obsession for Obsidian's journey. The goal? To amass a book collection that rivals Sorcerous Sundries and open a library in Baldur's Gate. AKA dump a lot of books in a vacant, preferably free, plot.

I would describe Obsidian as a blend of The Mummy's Evelyn O'Connell and *Final Fantasy XIV*'s Emet-Selch. Headstrong, curious to a fault, charismatic and powerful – but if you turn around for support she might have dissipated into a deep disapproving sigh. She takes librarianship very seriously, so I would strongly advise against standing between her and a coveted tome, lest you take a Magic Missile to the face. If you thought the librarian

in *Ghostbusters* was frightening, she's got nothing on the hushing power of Obsidian's glare.

Obsidian is not alone on this journey. Her fellow captive, Warren, is a heroic Githyanki monk who could be her ticket back to the city without having to get her hands dirty. Warren is an unusual Gith, aside from the signature blunt honesty. She is calm and practical, with a penchant for 'breezy sandals'. Thankfully, Warren was moved by Obsidian's passion for her library project and vowed to assist her on this holy mission. While finding a cure. Eventually.

THE RULES

1. Do whatever it takes to procure books.
2. Avoid heroics, unless books are involved.
3. Use conversational wizardry and make low-stakes choices to stay out of trouble.

CRASH COURSE

In a tale as old as time, Obsidian and Warren began their journey on the Nautiloid – infected and irritated. You know the drill. We weren't alone on the cephalopod of doom, as we soon encountered another Githyanki, Lae'zel.

The Githgals got along like a house on fire, making plans and throwing hands, but I paid little attention. My literary predicament spun around and around in my mind like a carousel, and I wanted to get off.

While looking for an escape route, Warren insisted upon freeing a half-elf named Shadowheart, who was contained in one of the eldritch pods. Thankfully this proved to be mere child's play for Obsidian, opening the pod without needing to overexert herself beyond a hand wave or two. She supposed the more allies

the better, especially if she was to achieve her goal.

After giving the nautiloid a crash course in Beach, I scoured the area for any signs of Obsidian's favourite thing: silent entities with spines that occasionally crack. Books of course. Obsidian's first find was less erudite and more crude, as she picked up Shanties for the Bitch Queen on a pier nearby. Spicy. With a raised eyebrow, she stowed it away for later. "The way some people honour their Gods," Obsidian thought. Aside from this literary gem, biohazard beach was fairly sparse on the book front and instead became a veritable companion collectathon.

Warren took responsibility for keeping a man known as Astarion in check, shortly after he'd held Obsidian at knife-point. All a "misunderstanding" he'd said, but he wasn't my concern. Mere moments later, we came across a hand emerging from a portal, along with an authoritative voice calling for help. Warren couldn't help herself and gave the hand a good slap,

THIS DRAGONBORN SORCERER DIDN'T SIGN UP FOR A HERO'S QUEST

BELOW: A devil I would. Uh, sorry what was the question?



Raphael: A devil you do.



before eventually pulling the wizard out of the swirling purple mass. The scent of old books, fresh ink upon parchment, and faint vestiges of unknown magic washed over her. He had the aroma of a library, ascending Obsidian to biblio-heaven. But, she promptly returned to reality

once he spoke. There's no love lost between wizards and sorcerers, but maybe, if they could both get past their innate arrogance, a fruitful partnership would form. For better or worse, if anyone can help her track down the books she needs, it would be Gale.

ABOVE: It's tough to top *The Illustrated Adventures of Balduran*. An exceptionally crude retelling of Balduran's adventures that teaches us the most valuable lesson, "Never underestimate the power of a turnip".

MUMMY RETURNS

Obsidian and Gale began bickering on the approach to a dilapidated crypt, while crouching by some pillars to avoid detection by the bandits in the area. "You're not versed in magic are you?" said Gale, in a condescending tone. "Of course I am!" Obsidian retorted, just because a sorcerer isn't traditionally "studied in magic" doesn't mean she's ignorant.

Suddenly, dice started rolling outside the crypt, as Warren had failed to charm the bandits I had planned to avoid – until 'patronising Pat' over here started grinding my gears. Once they had been swiftly dealt with, thanks in part to Obsidian's determination to showcase her magical prowess, we examined the area. I found a book on one of the bandits, Quelenna, called *Talis: Divination without Magic*. It looked like her lover had been trying to express her feelings via *Talis* card readings. Communicating that would be... challenging now.

To get into the crypt, I considered the unstable masonry by the nearby

HOLMES AND WATSON

This dynamic duo is on the book-case

OBSIDIAN

Race: Silver Dragonborn, born of ice and fire.

Class and subclass: Sorcerer – Draconic Bloodline.

Background: Sage.

Top proficiency: Charisma – to talk her way out of trouble.

Fun fact: Don't tell her not to touch something, because she will.



WARREN

Race: Githyanki, not related to Shrek.

Class and subclass: Monk – Way of the Open Hand.

Background: Guild Artisan – she's curious about the people of Faerûn.

Top proficiency: Dexterity – to throw hands with finesse.

Fun fact: If it's in front of her, then the universe wants her to have it.





» shrine to be a safer entrance than the front door. Not exactly. Obsidian's frustration boiled over as a second group began to attack – she could just about discern the shapes of books in the distance and her hunger was insatiable. The gang had conveniently gathered around a flammable barrel – her time had come. In one prodigious explosion the bandits were wiped out and she could finally get back to book hunting.

The Refectory library contained the kind of books you might expect – covering death and religion in all its grim glory. Someone must have been preoccupied with vampires, as there were several copies of *Curse of the Vampyr* in this room alone. Obsidian looked up for a moment as she observed Astarion scurrying about – noting in particular his deftness, charm and cold beauty which match the book's description of a vampire. Probably nothing to worry about. As I bagged more books, *Death and Divinity: A Godly Guide* held my interest – particularly the tale of Jergal. Armed with a title worthy of

ABOVE: To acquire *Traveller's Guide to the Sword Coast: Vol IX*, Obsidian might've, accidentally, got Warren arrested by grabbing it and bolting from the scene – leaving her as the only suspect.

Douglas Adams' prose, *The Lord of the End of Everything*, Jergal used the ambitions of Bane, Bhaal and Myrkul to free himself from his duty as the God of Death. When we stepped out into the main area of the crypt, we spotted some skeletal scribes and warriors scattered about.

Odd. Warren wondered if we could bring them peace by moving them elsewhere. She rather ungracefully punted a skeleton across the room, in order to begin the process of relocation, and they sprang to life along with all their friends. I reckon they had a bone to pick with us. Once

THE BOOK THIEF

A day in the life of a librarian in Faerûn

30% QUESTIONING
Silver-tongued logic and reasoning prevails. Most of the time.

35% CATALOGUING
With more than 75 unique books collected so far, it's time she learned the Dewey Decimal system.



20% HIDING BEHIND WARREN
During any conflict, Warren was the preferred human.

10% IN JAIL
Obsidian's thirst for knowledge is unstoppable, except when it isn't.

5% ARGUING WITH GALE
His conversational skills could power a hot air balloon.

OBSIDIAN CHANNELLED HER POWER INTO THE ARCANE LOCK AND IT SOON FELL OPEN



balance was restored in a flurry of well-placed punches and sorcery, Gale observed that the shrine here was dedicated to Jergal. If the books are anything to go by, this place must be truly ancient.

We discovered a hidden switch to the left of the shrine, uncovering the entrance to a tomb. A lot of effort had been made to conceal the sarcophagus within and, against her better judgement, Obsidian reached out and touched it. Levitating effortlessly out of it with the poise and grace of a magical girl was a mummified man – adorned in ornate gold detailing around his body and donned in surprisingly well preserved robes. He asked Obsidian, “What is the worth of a single mortal life?” This sounded familiar. A recent book she’d found, *On Death and Resurrection*, ponders the very same question and discusses how a person’s deeds influence their soul’s value. Obsidian said this and he scoffed about that being “what he expects I believe” – well, no, that’s what the book told me, thank you

very much. He said he’d see us again “when the time was right” (which was about 20 minutes later back at camp) and wandered off around the crypt, muttering to himself. I followed his ramblings into a side room and found a magically sealed tome – *The Book of Dead Gods*. Obsidian channelled her power into the arcane lock and it soon fell open. It contained a list of gods “once lost, but now restored after the Second Sundering”. Three of them are close together, but have been so aggressively scratched out on the page that the names are illegible. A Ray of Enfeeblement scroll also dropped out of the book, which Obsidian pocketed for Gale. He can have it, if he behaves.

MOSTLY HARMLESS

The more we learned of the parasite, Obsidian realised she was on borrowed time. So upon reaching the Emerald Grove she decided she must grab as many books as possible – damn the consequences. Most of the occupants of the Grove were tiefling refugees and druids, providing a rich tapestry of books to acquire. In an effort that would put contestants of Supermarket Sweep to shame, books were soon flying off of tables and out of tents. Obsidian hoped the guards wouldn’t take offence, it’s for the good of the people after all, surely anyone can see that?

Her charisma enabled her to pilfer a large number of books and get away with it, weaving tales of destiny and how there were bigger fish to fry. She was unstoppable, a veritable force of

book-based nature. Clink! Shit. Mortified, Obsidian had been arrested for picking up *The Realm According to Bumpo*. This is not a good book. After breaking out of prison and dancing around some exploding fungi, Obsidian reluctantly retrieved the book from the evidence chest in shame. This had to be Faerûn’s dumbest crime.

Once we’d composed ourselves, and Warren had stopped berating Obsidian for her lack of patience, I made sure to speak to the wizard, Rolan. This handsome yet arrogant tiefling offered Obsidian and Gale an introduction to the renowned wizard Lorroakan of Sorcerous Sundries in Baldur’s Gate. While his reputation in the city is somewhat dubious, Obsidian desperately wanted to get a peek at his private book collection. One way or another.

While exploring the Grove I’d decided that Obsidian and children generally don’t mix, she is overprotective of her books and these little terrors would simply ruin them with their grubby hands. Best to stay as far away as possible. To her dismay, Warren did the opposite. We stumbled across the alluring song of a harpy, not far from the Grove – Obsidian warned Warren of the danger, but she’d seen a child down by the beach and absolutely had to intervene. Reluctantly, Gale and I took position above the scene, as the harpies became hostile. A result of attempting to rescue their lunch.

Once dealt with, the small one – Mirkon – told us of his hideout and that we should stop by. Mol would be

BELOW: Hey Gale, whatcha readin’?



Baldur's Gate III

pleased, apparently? This felt like precious time away from book hunting, but Obsidian followed – flicking through the *The Illustrated Adventures of Balduran* along the way. Allegedly a children's book, it states there is absolutely NOTHING small about Balduran. Nuh uh. Not at all, no sir. Well, it's not like we can challenge that statement, is it?

We arrived at the hideout via a small fissure in the cavern wall – just wide enough for Obsidian and her bulging pack of books to get through. Warren spoke to the younglings and, as thanks for saving him, Mirkon presented her with a short story he had written about his saviour. I couldn't help but be touched by an attempt to create literature, crude as it is – not to mention omitting the fact that Warren wasn't alone in this 'daring rescue'. Ahem.

FOOL'S ERRAND

In the Druid Grove we met the famous author Volo. The Bard asked Obsidian for an account of the skirmish we fought through to gain entry to the Grove, and she recalled the event with conscientious accuracy, but instead he noted down ridiculous fabrications such as goblins with magic blowguns and the presence of red dragons! After reading the draft of Volo's *Not-so-Complete Guide to the Behaviour of Nymphs* it didn't surprise me that he was prone to exaggeration. But this conversation took the biscuit.

In the council chamber, Warren was attempting to peacefully deal with the Grove leaders and save a

young tiefling named Arabella from Kagha – a severe woman exuding Dwight-level desperation to become Grove manager. Meanwhile, I took this opportunity to pore over the books in the servant's quarters nearby. While avoiding the intimidating guard-wolf Silver, Obsidian came across *Extracts – The Rule of Three*, a popular part of a wider series of books that provide a beginner's guide to Alchemy. Better yet, this was a 50th anniversary edition! I wonder if it comes with a special sleeve? Even though Obsidian hadn't previously taken an interest in alchemy, this piqued her interest. It included notes from renowned alchemist Haskinn Xhesilaphin, a Dragonborn who had been descaled in his youth, and how this fuelled his alchemical discoveries.

Warren frequently reminded Obsidian that being rid of the tadpole should probably be a bit higher up the priority list. Seeing as there were more literary opportunities in the vicinity, Obsidian relented and agreed to meet with Nettie who had come recommended as a healer. There were more books of interest in Nettie's abode including *Oral Histories of Faerûn: The Spellplague* and, to Obsidian's excitement, part two of the *Extract* series *On Antidotes*. Warren helpfully picked this up to show her – waving in her direction as Obsidian simultaneously grabbed *The Spellplague*.

Allegedly intending to help, Nettie took us into the Enclave Library. Obsidian was struggling to restrain herself, as she glanced at the



BELOW: You what mate?

tantalising shelves. While speaking to Nettie, a stone slab ground shut behind us leaving no visible way out. The halfling proceeded to ask far too many questions, while brandishing a sharp stick. After misleading us down the garden path and back again, it turns out she had no cure, only "a way out". Sorry love, but it's a no from me. Obsidian can't entertain the thought of taking this poison while her library remains incomplete. Nettie's fate was sealed. Soon enough the books were once again in her possession and the great library raid could begin. Once we'd cleaned house, Nettie's circlet (Key of the Ancients) allowed us to quietly leave out the back way. No questions asked.

DEVIL'S DETAILS

On the road to the Blighted Village, a man appeared out of thin air in sparks. After waxing poetic and practically auditioning to be a storyteller at Obsidian's future library, he introduced himself as Raphael.

Obsidian was unsure if she felt threatened or propositioned or both,



Gale: Oh, I do apologise. I meant to ask: are you studied in magic. Namely: are you a wizard? Which you are not.

ALLEGEDLY INTENDING TO HELP, NETTIE TOOK US INTO THE ENCLAVE LIBRARY



but she was uncharacteristically overcome with desire for something other than books. With a snap of his fingers, Raphael whisked Obsidian and Gale to his base of operations – the House of Hope. Her library senses were tingling as she took in the banquet hall's opulence and faced

Raphael by a grand fireplace – the perfect book-reading spot. All rational thought left the building, as she became lost in library-based desire and attempted to navigate the conversation with the dandy.

Revealing himself to be a cambion, a devil, Raphael eloquently made his

ABOVE: Obsidian has collected over 75 unique books so far. Throughout her journey, she's been brought in for questioning at least four times and arrested once (but we don't talk about that).

case to strike a deal. Apparently he can solve our collective tadpole issue with ease, but after reading *Soul Coins: A Treatise*, Obsidian didn't fancy her soul becoming devilish currency. However, if she was to get access to the House of Hope again, she'd need to play along. For now, Gale mused that to capture Raphael's attention must mean he wants something. Badly. Problem is, so do I: the devil's book collection, and also his house. Obsidian averted Warren's questioning gaze as she burst back into existence on the dirt path, dismissing her disappearance as "complicated sorcerer things".

After a failed attempt at sneaking into the Blighted Village and a lovely chat with the surprisingly articulate orc Lump, I yelled in pained dismay and profanity. Warren came running to see what was wrong. Something was very wrong indeed – Obsidian had found another copy of *The Realm According to Bumpo*. Becoming a librarian in Faerûn is full of trials and tribulations, with none as trying as maintaining one's dignity. ■

TOME TRAVEL

Curiosities from Obsidian's cabinet



SPOOKY MEMOIRS

The Dank Crypt houses fascinating books pertaining to life, death, Religion, and teases the Dead Three. The Book of Final Breath relates to the everyman. It's a never-ending book of people's dying words. Grim, but good value for money, this memoir teases the imagination.



LEGO ADVENTURES

Journey through the Jungle includes an extremely obscure reference for Lego fans. If the protagonist's name Baron von Barron rings any bells, the minifigure villain of the same name (aka Sam Sinister) debuted in the 1990s Lego Adventures, Egypt range.



FAERÛN'S FABLES

Fables of Faerûn consists of five volumes. *The Boy and the Beholder* is the most familiar, as a spin on the Boy Who Cried Wolf. The trickiest to find is *The Dimwitted Drow* – in which seeking out the Mind Flayers' Lovecraftian library, rather than just studying a bit more, is a bad idea actually.



VOX POPULI

The Oral Histories of Faerûn series chronicles life in the realm. From a wood-elf's poem on Gith and Mind Flayers, to an interview with a Paladin Oathbreaker, we're given a fresh perspective. The *Spellplague* is a prime example of how we can be all affected by the same event, in very different ways.

FAR RE

Twenty years ago,
FAR CRY changed
the landscape of
PC gaming forever.

By Rick Lane

ACHING



Far Cry



n 2004, the first-person shooter reached the zenith of its popularity. PC gamers worldwide were

buzzing with anticipated for two massive games. In the left corner was *Doom 3*, id Software's first entry in the series for a decade that looked set to deliver a revolution in graphics technology. In the right was *Half-Life 2*, the preposterously inventive sequel to what was generally considered the best shooter ever made. Already titans of the genre, both sequels promised cutting-edge visuals, new advances in FPS storytelling, innovations in physics and interactivity, and of course, mind-melting action.

But there was another shooter released that year, bearing no such pedigree, that you could argue was ultimately more influential than either of these games. Set across a lush archipelago of tropical islands, *Far Cry* blew a gaping hole in the FPS' corridor constraints, showing the world the sandbox potential in hitherto the most linear of genres. It spawned not one, but two of the most successful first-person shooter series of all time, and helped pave the way for the modern open world game as we know it. It may even have changed how games were made, ushering in an era of faster, more dynamic game development.

All that, and it was created by a team barely out of school with zero professional experience. "Our team had absolutely no clue how to make games," says Cevat Yerli, founder of



Crytek and *Far Cry*'s director. "And [I was] asking them to compete against the very best in the world."

CRY BABIES

Far Cry's story begins, fittingly, in the Maldives. In 1996, Yerli was visiting the island on holiday. "I was lying on the beach and it was boring. There was nothing else to do," he says. An

ABOVE: Jack Carver's personality is mostly contained in his shirt, but he does sling a few wonderfully dumb one liners.

FAR RIGHT: *Far Cry* has a smattering of interior levels, which is where the game is usually most difficult.

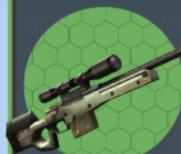
avid gamer and hobbyist programmer whose favourite game at the time was the *Quake* mod *Rocket Arena*, Yerli began to imagine the gaming opportunities afforded by an island. "I was inspired by the fact that there was a natural boundary to the world. It's not like a transparent wall saying, 'You can't walk beyond this,'" he says. "It opened up lots of opportunities for different types of gameplay that I hadn't seen before."

Yerli conceived of a game called *X-Isle*, where players would "shoot bad guys and save the princess" across a tropical archipelago of ten islands prowled by dinosaurs. "I was a big fan of Jurassic Park at the time", he explains. His imagined game wasn't singleplayer, but a mixture of PvP and PVE. "They would be fighting other players while there would be dinosaurs roaming around," Yerli explains. "A bit of the inspiration for *Hunt [Showdown]* at Crytek today comes very much from that PVE/PvP idea from *X-Isle*."

It would be convenient to say that Yerli flew back from the

THE FAR CRY SURVIVAL KIT

The best loadout for dealing with *Far Cry*'s enemies



AW50

Far Cry's Sniper Rifle is one of the best in its class. Essential for clearing out merc bases before you advance.



SILENCED MP5

The MP5 is the only real chance you have of killing enemies at close range without alerting their mates.



ROCKET LAUNCHER

Makes short work of the game's many helicopters, if you can find ammo for it.



OICW

A versatile late game weapon with a scope and grenade launcher that's crucial for dealing with TriGens.



Maldives and immediately founded Crytek to work on *X-Isle*. But its development was far more incremental than that. *X-Isle* was one of three game concepts Yerli experimented with over the next few years, working remotely across the internet with “50 to 55” other people. “It was an after-school thing. I would do my study and then I would tinker around and meet my friends online,” he says. “It was meant to be always just a hobby.”

Nonetheless, after a few years

signed a contract with the three brothers, which Yerli says was for “about \$70,000”.

Now understanding he could make games professionally, Yerli founded Crytek with his brothers. Its next project was an expanded *X-Isle* tech demo for Nvidia’s first programmable GPU – the GeForce 256. Yerli says that Crytek was only the second company in the world to receive a sample GPU for testing – behind only Microsoft. “We had, by the way, no clue what this was about,” Yerli says. “What was the difference between a GPU and a graphics card? What’s the point of it?” Crytek followed this up with another *X-Isle* demo, this one downloadable online as a benchmarking tool. “We had over ten million downloads,” Yerli says. “Crazy amounts even [by] today’s terms.”

It was this demo that attracted the attention of Ubisoft, who invited Yerli to Paris to discuss the idea of building a full game. “We drove by car for about ten hours, had a ten-hour long discussion with the CEO of Ubisoft, and signed the contract on the spot.” At this point in 2001, Yerli was 23 years old. “We had no idea those contracts take normally months to go back and

“WE HAD NO IDEA THOSE CONTRACTS TAKE MONTHS TO GO BACK AND FORTH”



A model of an alien, designed before Crytek settled on mutants.

they’d created a tech demo of *X-Isle*, which Yerli and his brothers, Avni and Faruk, began taking to trade shows. At E3 1999, they showed it to Nvidia. “They were shooting confetti bullets, and then those confetti bullets would hit a dinosaur and the dinosaur would look at you and walk away,” Yerli says. The tech demo impressed Nvidia so much that they



Far Cry

forth," he says. "Our ignorance helped us to be bold."

CRY TECH

Now contracted to make a game, Crytek spent a "year in exploration" during which *X-Isle* gradually evolved into *Far Cry*. The shared-world multiplayer concept became a more traditional split between PvE singleplayer and PvP multiplayer. The virtual dinosaurs were made extinct, as Crytek experimented with other enemy types. "We had aliens in the game at some point," Yerli says, an idea Crytek would return to in 2007's *Crysis*. Ultimately, they settled on a mixture of regular human enemies and more powerful mutants. "Today, I'm still questioning whether it was the right [choice], Yerli says. "At that time, it felt unique [compared] to other games, having mutants in there."

Indeed, Yerli states that Crytek's development philosophy was to do the opposite of what other shooters were doing at the time. "Instead of scripted, we want to be systemic," he says. "[Instead of] dark, we wanted to be bright. Instead of corridors, we wanted to be open."

All these things were facilitated by the game's concept of being set on islands. But there was also a reason why shooters had limited themselves to corridors, it was what the 3D technology they were built on was designed to do. "The work we wanted to do was not possible with existing engines," Yerli says. "It was as if we had to build the camera before we shoot the movie." Some of this work had already been done to achieve the *X-Isle* demos. But turning that demo into a full game meant more than having good rendering tech. It meant having the right tools.

One of *Far Cry*'s most crucial tools was born out directly out of the team's lack of experience. "We had no clue how to build levels, the old way or the new way," Yerli says.

What Yerli did know, however, was that he found the process of iterating upon levels frustrating. Historically, making any changes to a game during development meant compiling a new build to test those alterations, a process that could take hours or in extreme cases days. For Crytek figuring out how to design an open-ended shooter as its debut game meant a lot of testing.

"We thought, 'Wouldn't it be great if you could actually build the game as you tested it in real time?'" Yerli says. "I want to move a tree and then jump in the game and try it out immediately." The notion was contested by Crytek's engineers as unrealistic and unnecessary. "They came to me and said, 'We don't

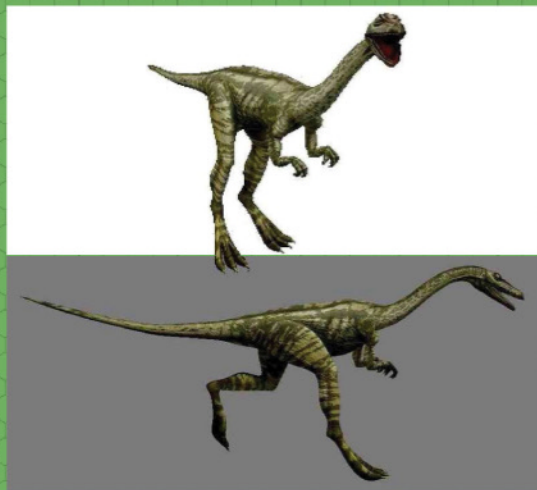
SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF HOW TO MAKE AN OPEN-LEVEL SHOOTER WORK

need that. Nobody's doing this," Yerli recalls. "It was the only time in my life when I said, 'I'm the CEO, just do it.'"

This led to the creation of CryEngine's Sandbox tool, one of the earliest examples of a real-time editing toolset within a game engine. With Sandbox, Yerli says, the team's productivity absolutely skyrocketed. "Suddenly, we were iterating 100 times a day, as opposed to one or two iterations a day," he explains. "That changed, even all the way to today, how engines were designed after CryEngine."

CRYSTALLISATION

With a toolset that allowed them to iterate rapidly, Crytek could focus on solving the problem of how to make an open-level shooter work. Mostly, this involved trial and error, although



A cut NPC model, we think.

TIMELINE

Tracing Far Cry's sequels and spiritual successors



March 2004:
Far Cry
(Crytek)



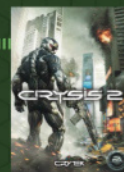
November 2007:
Crysis
(Crytek)



September 2008:
Crysis Warhead
(Crytek)



October 2008:
Far Cry 2
(Ubisoft Montreal)



March 2011:
Crysis 2
(Crytek)



November 2012:
Far Cry 3
(Ubisoft Montreal)



ABOVE: Visually, *Far Cry* has aged considerably more than *Crysis*. But there is still beauty in its saturated tropical islands.

some broader ideas emerged over time. As development proceeded, Crytek came up with the idea of ‘action-bubbles’ where levels alternated between open, sandbox areas the player could experiment in, connected by more linear pathways that gave Crytek greater control over pacing. “We called it the *veni, vidi, vici* game,” Yerli says. “Every action bubble has to allow me to assess the situation and make up my own mind how I want to address this objective and how I want to fight.”

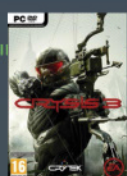
Eventually, *Far Cry*’s shooting grew to centre around ‘outsmarting’ enemies ‘versus out-reacting’ them, the latter being the norm for most shooters at the time. For this to work, *Far Cry* needed AI that could respond dynamically to the player’s movements and actions. “Typically,

monsters and enemies in other shooters would be triggered by like a laser or an infrared light – some kind of virtual invisible trigger line,” Yerli says. *Far Cry*’s AI, by comparison, was “about hearing and seeing as opposed to being triggered”.

Far Cry wasn’t the first game to do this – other games like *Thief* and *Deus Ex* had pioneered similarly layered, perceptive NPC AI. But *Far Cry*’s system had to compete with the scale and density of its levels. “We had to cheat a bit,” Yerli says. “We made the [enemies] intelligent, but also the world said, ‘Hey, I’m a tree, you can hide here. I’m a rock, you can hide here.’ The world is broadcasting information to the AI.” This concept would become the backbone of other AI intensive games, such as *Alien: Isolation*.

By spring 2003, Crytek had a version of *Far Cry* that was about 80% complete. For that year’s E3 expo, the company took a small slice of the game they thought showcased the game best to use as its demo. The demo represented the work they’d done so far, was ecstatically received. There was just one small problem. “The rest of the game was nothing like it.”

Yerli explains that the demo was the only part of *Far Cry* where the ‘veni, vidi, vici’ gameplay loop happened all at the same time. “For the rest of the game it was either, ‘I just conquer,’ or, ‘I just see,’ or, ‘I just walk around,’” he says. “It wasn’t driving options.” Yerli wanted players to be moving between these states at each moment during play, switching between hunter and hunted, predator >>



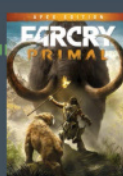
February 2013:
Crysis 3
(Crytek)



May 2013: *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*
(Ubisoft Montreal)



November 2014:
Far Cry 4
(Ubisoft Montreal)



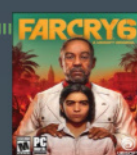
March 2016:
Far Cry Primal
(Ubisoft Montreal)



March 2018:
Far Cry 5 (Ubisoft Montreal & Toronto)



February 2019:
Far Cry: New Dawn
(Ubisoft Montreal)



October 2021:
Far Cry 6
(Ubisoft Toronto)

Far Cry

and prey, in every combat set piece throughout the game.

With *Far Cry* supposed to launch at the end of 2003, Yerli decided the entire game needed to be rebuilt to embrace the design of the demo. Yerli says, "We figured out how to build *Far Cry* at E3."

CRYSIS

The final year of *Far Cry*'s development was a trial by fire, as Crytek rebuilt the game based on two years spent learning how to make it. Throughout this last year, the development was dogged by problems. Even with their 'intelligent' world, the complexity of the maps meant that getting AI to work as they wanted was still incredibly challenging. "Nvidia would tell us that your data amount going into the GPU and out is 100 times over anything in the market," Yerli says. "Ubisoft was rightly going nuts, because we would promise them AI every single week and it would take months. At some point, they said, 'Build corridors,' and I go, 'I can't build corridors. It's an island!'"

During this period, Crytek also cut several levels, to the point where they worried the game might be too short. "We had no experience in designing or scoping, understanding how big is big," Yerli says. "But Ubisoft said, 'No your game is just fine for the length'. And in hindsight it was a good thing because [the levels] didn't really add to the story." There was even a last-minute debate to remove the mutants from the game. But Crytek had nothing to replace them with. "We said if we



FAR CRY DEMONSTRATED THE POTENTIAL OF OPEN-WORLD GAMING OUTSIDE RPGS

TOP: Concept art of *Far Cry*'s second level, set on a wrecked aircraft carrier.

FAR RIGHT: Action bubbles are often connected by vehicular set-pieces.

kill them, we just have to introduce another set of [non-humanoid] AI," Yerli says. "It was too late for that."

Still, with two months left to go before launch, bugs and QA issues were piling up. "At some point, the management team of Ubisoft said, 'Why are you not fixing those bugs?'" Yerli was likewise puzzled, and went to speak to Andrey Khonich, the game's renderer lead. "Khonich said to me, 'Don't tell anybody but I'm writing a new renderer.'"

Yerli was confounded. "I was like, 'What are you talking about? We are finishing the game!' He's like, 'I'm almost done. It'll fix all the bugs, it's gonna be a lot better. I made mistakes in the design before.'"

Ultimately, Yerli decided to trust Khonich's judgement. "He was right. They QA'd the whole game and the thousands of [bugs] disappeared, and the game was running 50% faster." Nonetheless, it was a risky decision. "Everybody will say we are crazy, because you are about to ship the car and he's like, 'Wait, let me change that engine.'"

CRY HAVOC

Far Cry released on March 23 in the US, and three days later in the EU. "Everybody at Crytek was very scared," Yerli says. "We were working till the last day." Indeed, things were so tight that Crytek skipped a final round of external tests. "We had our

gold master DVD, by personal courier in a plane, delivered to the manufacturing facility so they could go straight to manufacturing the copies," he adds. "Things could have gone awfully wrong at that point. But we ran out of days."

Crytek need not have worried. *Far Cry*'s reception was overwhelmingly positive. PC Gamer awarded it a score of 95, writing, "Not only does *Far Cry* offer utterly sensational visuals and jaw-dropping gameplay, but it also heralds the arrival of developer Crytek, which now joins id Software and Valve at the head of the shooter class." To Yerli and the team, the reviews were a huge relief. "We were reborn at that point," he says.

Far Cry's immediate effect was to establish Crytek's position as a leading developer in the industry, and thoughts within the studio naturally turned to the next project. Which brings us to a question. Why did Ubisoft end up making *Crysis*, rather than *Far Cry 2*? "We could have done *Far Cry 2* in 12 months, tops," Yerli says. "But I [didn't] want to go into a sequel. I want us to manifest a culture of innovation and creation. So I want us to reinvent again." Yerli elaborates that, as Crytek now understood how to make games, he wanted to rebuild everything from the ground up. "CryEngine 2 was rewritten for *Crysis*, and *Crysis* was targeted to take every single thing that we did just light years ahead."

CRYOGENICS

Because of this decision, *Far Cry*'s legacy has two distinct strands to it. There is Crytek's own work on the *Crysis* series, which continued to push Crytek's interests in visual fidelity and emergent 'action bubble'

TRIGEN WAR

Here are the foes that made
Far Cry's latter half so challenging



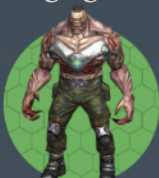
CHIMP

The First TriGen you encounter. Can only use melee attacks, but its speed, strength and reach mean they can kill you quickly.



SQUEAKER

If you thought mercs were accurate, these speedy human TriGens can shoot the beads of seawater off your Hawaiian shirt.

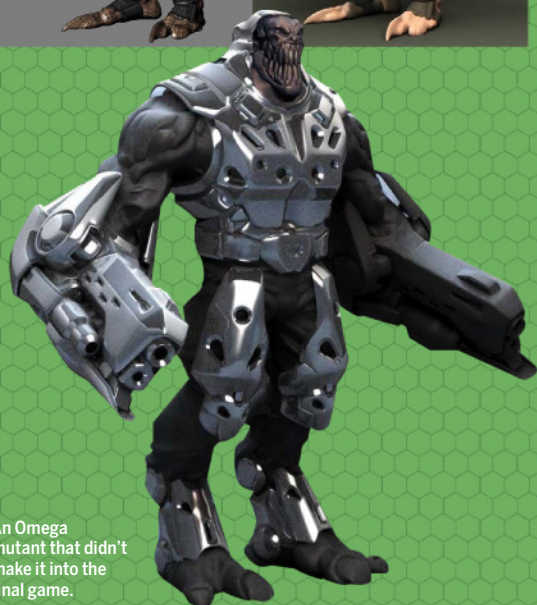


FAT BOY

Wielding rocket launchers and able to withstand huge amounts of damage, *Far Cry*'s Fat Boys are the ultimate combat challenge.



An Omega mutant that didn't make it into the final game.



systems, and there are Ubisoft's direct sequels to *Far Cry*, which expanded their scope into true open worlds. Yerli says that, while he found *Far Cry 2* "a bit of a disappointment," on the whole he's "very proud" to see where the series has gone under Ubisoft's direction. "What I liked about it is they added a lot more storytelling to the open nature of the game, and combining that is not easy."

Far Cry's influence is also evident on a broader level. From a technical perspective, alongside the significance of CryEngine's real-time editor, *Far Cry* played a key role in the popularisation of 64-bit gaming. While it wasn't the first 64-bit game, it was the first to demonstrate significant performance improvements with AMD's 64-bit processors. Yerli even traces a line from *Far Cry* to the current AI boom. "Somebody in the chip market said to me, because of *Far Cry* and *Crysis*, a lot of people are working on AI... so it's partially your fault," he says. "Without *Far Cry* there would be no *Crysis*, and without *Crysis* there would not have been a significant push on GPUs."

While this link is perhaps more tenuous, *Far Cry*'s impact on wider

game design is much more concrete. Alongside the sequels and successors it spawned, *Far Cry* demonstrated the potential of open-world gaming outside RPGs, particularly to Ubisoft. "Back in the day, Ubisoft was a very different company. A lot of their games were not open like *Far Cry*," Yerli says. "Ubisoft inherited this DNA, not just for *Far Cry*, but for a lot of their games."

Far Cry's influence, then, is enormous. But what of the game at the heart of it all? Twenty years hence, it is more obviously the creation of a developer figuring out how to make its ideas work. Visually, it holds up surprisingly well. Not as well as *Crysis*, but there's still an allure in its brightly coloured jungles and crystalline blue oceans. Mechanically, though, its fuzzy stealth and preternaturally accurate AI make it punishingly difficult compared to the game's that followed it.

As Yerli points out, however, the elements that make *Far Cry* tougher to return to are also what made it happen in the first place. "*Far Cry* was only possible because we were inexperienced," he says. "You have to stand out. Stand out with what you do." ■



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Crunch time

There's no doubt about it, the game industry is having a very tough moment right now. The large number of developers losing their jobs and studios being shuttered is incredibly disheartening, especially so when some of those studios, such as Arkane Austin, have been responsible for creating some of my favourite ever games.

As our diverse, well-scoring selection of games this issue shows, though, there's still plenty of quality game-makers out there producing engaging and unique gaming experiences. Sure, not every single one of this issue's games post landmark scores, but I'd argue it is now more than ever that studios, both large and small, producing good games like these, need supporting. Here's hoping brighter days lie ahead.

R. Jones

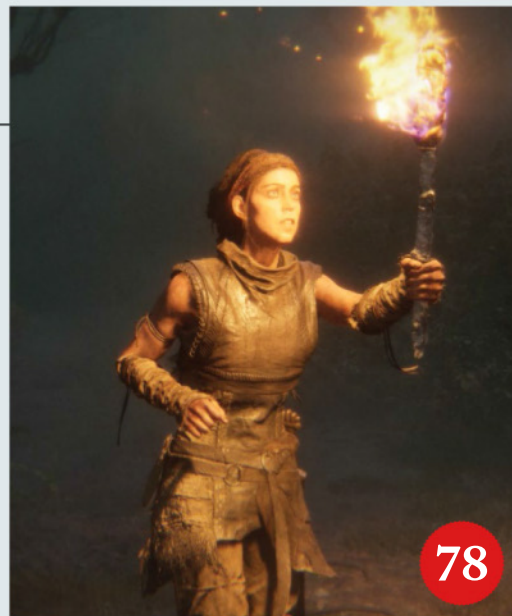
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PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK

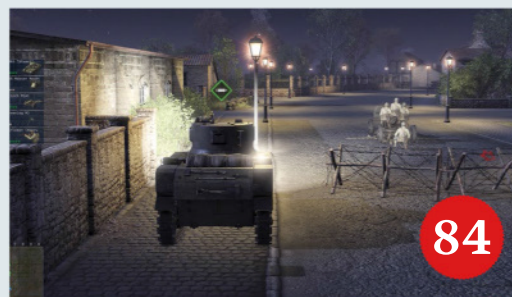
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's cosmic reviewers...



FRASER BROWN

Specialist in
Getting lost in space

Currently playing
Homeworld 3

This month
Attempted to guide the PCG mothership back home. Ended up at Omicron Persei 8.



PHIL IWANIUK

Specialist in
Getting his elbow down

Currently playing
MotoGP 24

This month
Could be found circling Bath's roundabouts on a Ducati Panigale V4S. Got dizzy and barfed.



ROBIN VALENTINE

Specialist in
Getting crazier

Currently playing
Hellblade 2

This month
Sought psychotic and blood-filled vengeance against his foes. Oh, and in Hellblade 2 he...



SHAUN PRESCOTT

Specialist in
Getting nuns McNuggets

Currently playing
Indika

This month
Walked the halls of PC Gamer Towers making nun puns. We'll have nun of that, Shaun.



JAKE TUCKER

Specialist in
Getting soldiers killed

Currently playing
Men of War II

This month
Pondered what was more masochistic, playing RTS games, or going to the dentist.



74

GALAXY QUEST

HOMEWORLD 3 is a flashy, ambitious RTS, but some of the original magic is missing

By Fraser Brown

The sight of *Homeworld 3*'s sleek, indomitable mothership preparing to jet off into the unknown, accompanied by radio chatter and a moody score, feels like a homecoming. For newcomers, it's a striking scene; for veterans, it calls to mind the original mothership getting ready to leave Kharak – the beginning of one of the best strategy games ever created. It's enough to make one all tingly.

Homeworld 3 wants to remind you of its legacy a lot, especially in the campaign. After the events of *Homeworld 2*, Karan S'jet, the mothership's navigator, was sent on a mission to deal with a looming crisis, but she never returned. Twenty years later her protégé, Imogen S'jet, is following in her footsteps, with a new mothership and a new fleet that must strike out on their own, once again without support.

But where the original *Homeworld* often took a minimalist approach – from its narrative to its map design – *Homeworld 3* is comparatively busier, with maps full of debris and terrain, and a story that constantly wants you to take a break from the fun stuff so you can listen to boring conversations in hideous cutscenes that look ripped

from a bad '90s sci-fi game. The plot is mostly forgettable nonsense and I confess I checked out pretty quickly. The good news, though, is that the missions are largely brilliant.

Comparatively busier, with maps full of debris and terrain

Each of them puts the fleet in a new kind of peril, and there are some real doozies. You'll be hiding from enemies in nebulae; commandeering gargantuan, monolithic space complexes; setting up elaborate blockades, using turrets and mines to create corridors of death; and sabotaging factories in kamikaze strikes. I even kinda enjoyed the return of another 'avoid the asteroids' slog, because nostalgia has poisoned my brain.

SPACE JAM

The original *Homeworld* felt revolutionary thanks to its truly 3D

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The third game in the legendary space RTS series

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Blackbird Interactive

PUBLISHER
Gearbox Publishing

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900K,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
homeworld
universe.com

battles, but *Homeworld 3* makes you appreciate the cosmic conflicts so much more thanks to space terrain. Every single mission is laden with screen-filling structures and asteroids, creating defensible positions, chokepoints and ambush spots. How you approach a fight matters so much more because, while you have this complete freedom of movement, you also have maps that give you both advantages and limitations.

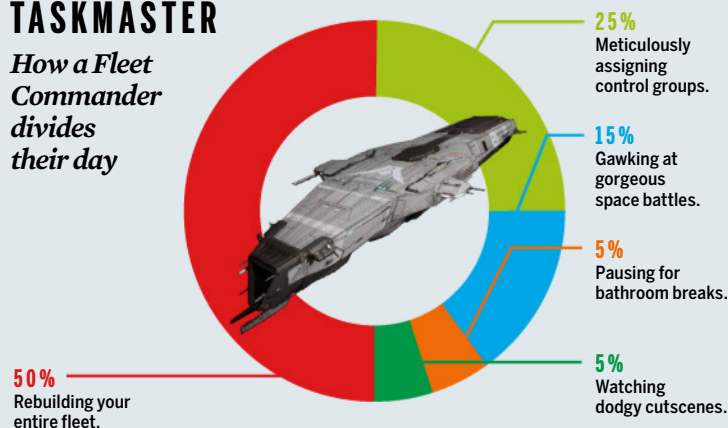
The complexity of the maps does make it harder to control your fleet, but I found the default control scheme to be mostly up to the task of managing these tricky 3D battles. It's easy to hop around the massive maps and focus on specific ships and groups, the attack move order means you can keep up the aggression constantly, and being able to select groups of enemies to attack – letting the AI prioritise targets – gives you space to deal with the big picture stuff. Thanks to the pair of preset control schemes and the option to rebind nearly everything, you should be able to find your sweet spot after a bit of tinkering.

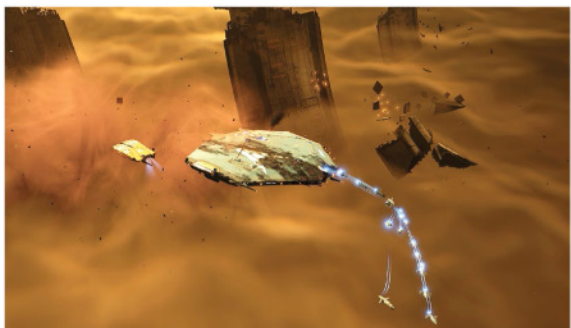
In some ways, the terrain actually makes it easier to navigate space. Landmarks help you make sense of the scale of the maps so much better than the endless void, and I usually found myself using terrain when I was setting destinations and waypoints. That said, there are still some quirks, like ships deciding to hover underneath a platform instead of on top of it, or the way that large groups will spread out when you send them to a specific location, rather than all of them trying to get as close as possible to the location you've marked. Pathfinding is pretty wonky at times, too, necessitating the creation of a chain of waypoints if you want to keep your fleet's movements precise.

I must admit I would have liked some maps that were just set in deep space, without all of these

TASKMASTER

How a Fleet Commander divides their day





ABOVE: The ugly cutscenes feel like they belong in a different game.

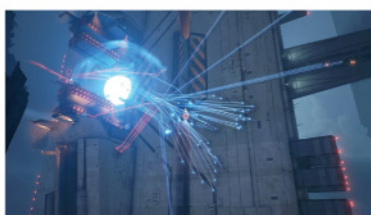
FAR LEFT: Most ships are fragile, but battlecruisers mean business.

BELOW: Fights can be hectic, but the scalable UI and speed controls make life easier.





BELOW: Even your smallest ships can put on a heck of a light show.



accoutrements, though. Full 3D movement already gives you plenty to deal with, and I miss the purity of its predecessors' take on space combat. Sometimes a bunch of ships dancing around each other and trying to score a killing blow is enough. That was the magic of *Homeworld* – this elegant balance of complexity and simplicity – and it can sometimes feel like *Homeworld 3* is just trying too hard.

While every mission has a distinct vibe, unique objectives and a fresh layout, your fleet always persists. Whenever you start a mission, everything you've built in the previous one comes with you. If you absolutely kicked ass in the last one, you're going to be off to a better start in the next one. But the pace of the missions means that you usually still have time to build up before things heat up. What's disappointing, though, is the lack of player control over when a mission ends. Only one mission lets you select when you hit the hyperspace button and leave. The rest of them just chuck you into the next one the moment you complete the main objective. This means you have no time to mop up the remaining salvage or resources, or replace any ships that you lost in the final battle.

And I really could have done with a bit of time to replenish my forces because, oh boy, things blow up quickly in *Homeworld 3*. Even with the HP buff BBI has given ships since the demo, most of them still can't take much of a beating. Every ship just feels like it's one class lower than its older counterpart. When you first start fielding capital ships in *Homeworld 1*, they feel like monsters, but in *Homeworld 3* they're more comparable to corvettes and end up requiring a lot more babysitting. Support frigates help alleviate this with their powerful life-giving beams, but once they get taken out you're going to be looking at a lot of debris.

Fragile though they may be, most vessels excel in their given roles, and when you're building groups for specific tasks and then flinging them into kinetic battles amid stunning stellar backdrops, it's a joy to watch them work. Using the formation system to turn groups of torpedo frigates into orbs of death proves to

be a particular delight. As is watching a lumbering battlecruiser slowly coming in between enemy multi-beam frigates and your precious close-range ion frigates, taking most of the heat and shrugging off laser strike after laser strike – a giant piece of mobile cover bristling with turrets.

It took me around 15 hours to finish up the campaign, making it a bit more brisk than its predecessors. But I doubt I'll play it again. Despite the quality of the missions, the heavily scripted AI means a second outing just isn't going to offer

much. Even when the AI is being aggressive, it never feels reactive, instead feeling like it's just following a schedule. It can put up a fight, sure, but only when the mission calls for it, giving your adversary some crucial advantages, but once you've figured out the script, it's incapable of pulling off any surprises. This also means, when you don't play the way you're meant to, it has no idea what to do.

INFINITY WAR

Skirmishes spice things up, though, with the AI acting more like a human player. While the simple objectives – like destroying the mothership or simply annihilating every enemy vessel – aren't as stimulating as the campaign's, the sandbox nature of these skirmishes ends up showcasing the best parts of *Homeworld*. And, of course, you can get to play as the villains, battering the Hiigarans with your corvette-focused Incarnate fleet

with its distinct roster of ships, not least of which is a dedicated capture corvette. This nasty bugger can pinch enemy vessels and add them to your fleet, and while the Hiigarans also have this capability, they have to use tough but sluggish resource controllers for these heists, which means taking them off the critical task of building your economy. The rosters do feel balanced, while not being boring and symmetrical.

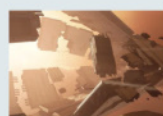
Then there's the new mode: War Games. It's... not my cup of Earl Grey. It's an RTS take on roguelikes, where each run gives you only a specific ship loadout – levelling up unlocks more of them – which can be buffed by artefacts that you earn along the way. Every single mission sees you bombarded by enemy incursions, which only grow in intensity the longer you spend playing. It punishes you for taking your time. The AI isn't any more reactive than the campaign's, but it's certainly more unrelenting and exhausting.

Despite ostensibly allowing you to play solo, it just doesn't make sense without a co-op buddy. But even with a co-pilot in tow, I just can't see the appeal. You get fewer options, less time and more threats. None of this really plays to *Homeworld 3*'s strengths and I'd rather just dive into a co-op comp stomp in the skirmish mode. It's good that BBI has tried something new – it shouldn't be entirely beholden to the past – but this ain't it, I'm afraid.

Homeworld was such a formative game for me that it's hard to imagine anything knocking it off its pedestal. But *Homeworld 3* does make it wobble. A lot. Watching dogfights in the canyons of a frozen moon or a formation of bombers boosting up the wall of an industrial complex – praying some of them survive the turret fire – is undeniably thrilling stuff. But whenever I had to sit through another terrible cutscene, babysit my capital ships or do another run of War Games, the wobbling ceased. So this isn't quite the *Homeworld 3* I always dreamed of, but there are times where it gets pretty close. ■

AFTER ACTION REPORT

Homeworld 3's best missions



MISSION 7 NARAKA GATE

A rare defence mission, where the fleet must stand its ground against enemy waves inside a gate complex. It's a tricky one, but using turrets and mines to create corridors of death is a joy.



MISSION 9 WARSAGE CITADEL

A sneaky strike against an imposing space station full of docked ships, this one's all about the vibes, where it looks like you're doing hit and runs in a less than cheery afterlife.



MISSION 13 THE LAMENT

Homeworld 3's final mission has plenty of objectives but also feels like a sandbox in which you can build the biggest fleets possible and throw them at the toughest enemy challenges.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Homeworld 3 takes some big swings, but it never quite comes together in the same way as its predecessors.

77

LEAN OFFERING

MOTOGP 24 fights off franchise fatigue with new rider market and steward systems

By Phil Iwaniuk

Beaten all the bosses in *Cuphead*, have you? Finished a blindfolded *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* playthrough using a *Donkey Konga* bongo controller? That's cute. Try doing a lap of *MotoGP 24*'s predecessor in the rain with all the assists off. In recent years, Milestone's officially licensed racing sim has offered some of the sternest challenges in PC gaming – and this year, the stewards are watching.

Fortunately, while the more enjoyable bits of that challenge remain in this year's outing, these are slightly more forgiving 1,000cc beasts than 2023's machinery. The dreaded 'pick-up

effect', in which the bike stood itself up more as throttle was applied, narrowing lean angle and thus cornering trajectory, has been all but nerfed. Kerbs feel slightly less deadly to venture a wheel onto, and stopping the bike feels kinder too.

Meanwhile, the race stewards have been imbued with a keener eye on AI riders' nonsense. You'll see them having to take long-lap penalties now for crashing into their competitors or venturing out beyond track limits too many times, and this newfound scrutiny on AI rider behaviour feels like a noticeable and significant step forwards.

Joining these newly fastidious stewards on the podium of new stuff is an updated rider market system that sees other riders from the MotoGP class, as well as Moto2 and Moto3 categories, moving between teams. A simple enough concept, but one that really helps to keep you interested after your first season.

As the seasons progress, you see younger Moto2 and Moto3 riders filtering up through the categories. Usually with this series it's the sheer challenge of the bike's handling that keeps me engaged, but I found myself particularly interested in watching the likes of Fermín Aldeguer and David Alonso ascend up to the premier class so that I could rub leathers with them.

Milestone knows this is a challenging game. It's why the team introduced 'neural aids' last year, a set of steering and braking helpers that use AI to modify your inputs in a

subtler way than most racing game assists. They're present and correct here, and although the best experience is feeling the full force of the bike with all those assists disabled, they're a useful training tool.

Racing with adaptive difficulty on harks back to the '90s

EASY RIDER

They're joined by a new adaptive difficulty system in this iteration

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An officially licensed bike racing sim that's big on authenticity

EXPECT TO PAY

£45

DEVELOPER

Milestone Interactive

PUBLISHER

Milestone Interactive

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7 9700K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Ti

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

LINK

store.steampowered.com/app/2581700/MotoGP24/

which takes note of your pace from event to event and adjusts your competitors' pace accordingly. I'm not sure how to feel about it, truthfully. On one hand, it's a nice way to smooth out the occasional difficulty spike you tend to get at certain circuits where that learning AI seems unbeatable.

On the other, racing with adaptive difficulty on harks back to the '90s arcade days, when opponents seemed to dawdle ahead of you, wait for you to catch up, then revealed their true pace when you got close. Like the neural aids, it's a crutch to use during the onboarding process. But the objective should be to turn it off, and just enjoy how detailed, demanding and nuanced that riding model is.

And it's just as well that the rider market and the feel of the bike is so interesting, because elsewhere the new features and improvements are thin on the ground. Two games ago, *MotoGP 22* treated us to a wonderful new mode, 'Nine', which mixed archive footage from the 2009 season and a voiceover with races that let you relive key moments from different riders' perspectives. It was a towering achievement, the likes of which we haven't seen elsewhere from PC racing games.

That's the nature of annual releases. We crave innovation, but a yearly dev cycle doesn't allow much room for that so we find ourselves in a sports and racing game landscape where titles offer *just* enough to get us to sign up for one more go on the annual merry-go-round. *MotoGP 24*'s rider market, stewards and handling tweaks offer exactly that – precisely enough motivation to launch into another epic career mode save, but not a drop more. ■

NOSTRADAMUS

Predicting the next champs

JOE ROBERTS

An American who's found his form in Moto2 just as Liberty media buys the sport. With a decent 2024, he'll be on the big bikes next year.



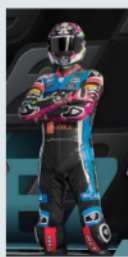
FERMIN ALDEGUER

This is a bit of a cheat, because Fermín's already signed for Ducati next season. So let's go further – a win in his rookie season.



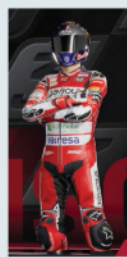
ALONSO LOPEZ

Another Moto2 prospect who's coming up to the boil this season, winning the opening round. Still needs to prove himself.



DAVID ALONSO

A Colombian Moto3 prodigy with a winning smile and razor-sharp elbows. He might skip Moto2 altogether for MotoGP.



PC GAMER VERDICT

A good, if iterative entry to the MotoGP series of bike sims that is slightly more approachable to new riders now.

79



ABOVE: The new helmets and race suit options are very welcome additions.

FAR LEFT: Anyone caught handballing or fouling will be shown this XL red card.



The sense of speed is nerve-jangling in first-person cam, but it's unusable.

NECKS LEVEL

The twilight at the end of **V RISING**'s Early Access tunnel

By Lewis Parker

I first started playing *V Rising* almost two years ago, not long after it launched into Early Access back in May 2022, and immediately it became an obsession. My friends and I would jump online every week and stay up until the early morning to work on our cute little vampire castle together, like we were playing a macabre version of *Animal Crossing*.

Eventually we all moved onto different games, but *V Rising* still frequently crossed my mind. I kept wondering what the full release of the game would look like, considering how feature rich and uncharacteristically bug-free the game already was for an Early Access title. Now 1.0 is here, and mostly it is just a more polished version of that initial launch, though with some very welcome additions – and I'm obsessed all over again.

FANGTASY WORLD

V Rising is an action RPG at its core, but with mechanical layers that make it more of a survival sandbox. You play as a vampire, and every conceivable vampire trope has been tied into some element of the gameplay. Sunlight sets you on fire, garlic and silver will inflict debuffs, and of course you have to drink blood

to survive and grow in strength. Most of your time is spent hunting down bosses, killing them to steal their powers. If you're on a PvP server, you'll also be turning those powers on other bloodsuckers

– vampires never do seem to get along, do they? What brings it all together is the crafting. Upgrading your gear requires you to farm resources, but they have to be refined at your player-built castle. Defeating bosses

unlocks different workstations you can build, further expanding your options for what you can make.

That steady pace of dopamine hits is what'll keep you playing

COUNT GET ENOUGH

This gameplay loop is where *V Rising* really shines. It's a familiar formula – a little bit *Valheim*-with-vampires – but it stands out thanks to a progression system that's wonderfully well-balanced and rewarding. Boss fights feel tough but fair, and each is

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A vampire-focused action RPG with a side helping of survival and crafting mechanics

EXPECT TO PAY
£29.50

DEVELOPER
Stunlock Studios

PUBLISHER
Level Infinite

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 7700X,
64GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
playvrising.com

unique enough to make every new encounter fresh and exciting. That's impressive considering there are 57 of them out there to hunt down.

Each drops its own loot, from the aforementioned workshop plans, to spells, weapon blueprints, and even new animal forms you can transform into to access different areas. Some rewards are more vital than others, but it all feels meaningful, and that steady pace of dopamine hits is what'll keep you playing long past your bedtime.

You can feel the benefit here of *V Rising*'s journey through Early Access, the gratifying feel of its gameplay loop perfected through two years of player feedback. And if it's still not quite in your sweet spot, a suite of options let you tweak the experience to your liking, including two new difficulty modes.

Your castle at the heart of it all is brilliantly easy to create and customise, a far cry from other RPGs that feature similar mechanics. I've recently been replaying *Fallout 4*, as I'm sure a lot of us have, and I completely forgot how much of a pain it is in that game to get all the parts of your buildings to line up. By contrast, *V Rising* makes building the gothic castle of your dreams a breeze, every wall and feature snapping into place without any hassle.

Using it as a base for your adventures works just as smoothly, with quality-of-life features like dumping all of your items into appropriate chests for each item type at the press of a button. There's even a new mechanic in the full release that allows you to relocate everything at your old castle somewhere new, including all of your chests with their loot still inside them, with no fuss.

Crafting outside of your castle is equally as straightforward, allowing you to manufacture weapons, armour and healing items in the background (that will then automatically equip) as you adventure. Considering *V Rising*'s focus on crafting and item

EXHI-BITE A

Five of the different ways your vampire can be debuffed

1 GARLIC EXPOSURE
Increases damage taken by 1% with every stack. Found around some human encampments.

2 HOLY RADIATION
Encountered within monasteries, damage varies from each location.



3 SUN EXPOSURE
Slowly builds when standing in direct sunlight for too long, eventually causing you to burn.

4 SILVER SICKNESS
Accrued from carrying coins, such as silver, in your inventory. Damage based on how many coins you're carrying.

5 IGNITE
Unlike sunlight, ignition-based damage triggers immediately from spells and can only be dodged.



ABOVE: Newly added armour customisation options in the full release of *V Rising* helps you to look dashing, as well as threatening.

FAR LEFT: The final boss of *V Rising*: absorbing Vitamin D through your skin.

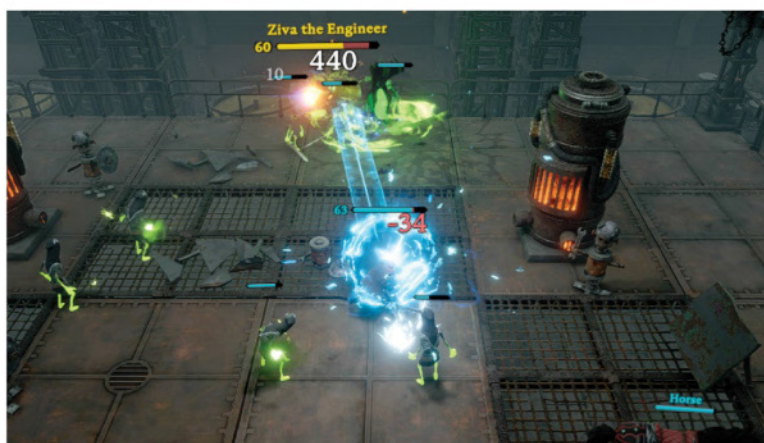


CUSTOMISE YOUR VAMPIRE



ABOVE: There are options to make your vampire ugly and ghoulish if you want. I opted not to.

FAR RIGHT: A mechanic exclusive to multiplayer mode: getting your mate to revive after you get eaten by a Corpse Pile.



management, it seems the developers are well aware that players want to spend less time navigating menus and more time hunting down your prey.

DEDICATED SERVERS

V Rising's biggest weakness is that none of this works quite as well alone. For this review, I had to play solo to see all the new content in time (something I'd never done prior) and I couldn't shake the feeling that the world feels lacking in character when you're on your own.

Admittedly, playing with friends almost always enhances your experience of a game, but it does go a little further than that in *V Rising's* case. Many of the bosses, for example, are on the wrong side of overwhelming when tackled alone, bombarding you with summoned minions and homing attacks that make you pray for a partner to offset some of the heat. And while building and designing your castle is still fun and useful on your own, putting the effort in to make it look just so does start to feel a bit pointless when you don't have someone to show it off to.

Playing alone also makes the game's lack of narrative much more evident. Outside of a pretty vague opening cinematic and a few pieces of lore you can stitch together from NPC dialogue and certain boss descriptions, there really isn't any story to speak of in *V Rising*. Not every game needs one, of course, but even just a little more world-building – perhaps some notes and diary entries to find on your travels – would have helped give the game more personality.

To be fair, a few random events and encounters have been added in version 1.0 to make the world feel a little bit more alive. You'll sometimes encounter bandits asleep at campsites, certain enemy types will now lie in wait to ambush each other (or you), and travelling carts have been added that will house either loot or relatively powerful enemies who are being kept prisoner. They're nice additions, but unfortunately too few and far between to flesh things out beyond a single playthrough.

When your friends are making endless vampire jokes in your ears it's not something you really notice, but

when you're making repeated treks across the map solo, it can all start to feel a little hollow without that narrative meat to it. If you are thinking of trying *V Rising* singleplayer, be warned that it doesn't feel like the intended experience.

Whether solo or multiplayer, the game runs perfectly. I haven't

encountered a single stutter, graphical bug, or other technical issue to speak of. That's consistent with my experience of the Early Access version. It's not unheard of for an update to break things – but not here.

That's despite the 1.0 release introducing several graphical improvements. The lighting in particular is drastically better – admittedly a little ironic for a game where you spend the daytime cowering indoors – and I noticed that a lot of foliage and greenery has been added to some of the previously barren areas of the map in a bid to spruce (ahem) things up.

GIVE AND STAKE

In terms of what's been added for the 1.0 update, content-wise, there's an entirely new endgame area (The Ruins of Mortium), two new weapon types (bows and whips), six new bosses, a new V Blood type, and dozens of new ways to decorate your castle. Version 1.0 (finally) also adds controller support, although unfortunately I couldn't find any way to remap my buttons in-game. The camera controls also felt a bit wonky on controller, forcing you to hold a button to rotate where you're aiming (which was cumbersome to do). It's

overall a nice addition, but hopefully they will iron some things out in a future update.

The new endgame area is particularly punishing, and its boss fights – specifically the final one against Dracula – were the ones that made me miss having a teammate around the most. However, considering a singleplayer or PvE playthrough would basically be over once you've cleared this section, I think the developer deserves a pass for making the final area in the game the most difficult one to complete.

The two new weapon types are also bolstered by the addition of a new final tier of weapon class: Legendary Ancestral weapons. This new class provides weapons with unique modifications that separate them from the previous Epic final tier, breathing fresh life into older weapon types and giving veteran players a reason to try out older weapon types again.

Be warned; whips can only be unlocked by defeating the ridiculously powerful Simon Belmont, who will hunt you down on his own accord once you make your way into the final area of the map. He absolutely destroyed me the first time I bumped into him, so make sure you're at least level 80 before trying to take him on. The addition of the Simon Belmont boss fight and his whip were the only pieces of *Castlevania* content I could find in *V Rising's* base game, so *Castlevania* aficionados will have to purchase the new cosmetic DLC pack if they're thirsty for anything more.

It feels a bit weird writing a review of a game I've already been playing and enjoying for two years. I knew it was going to be a good score, because even before touching the 1.0 release, I'd already experienced the majority of what *V Rising* has to offer, and loved it.

The developer would have had to have monumentally screwed up to tarnish that already fantastic experience. Instead, with small improvements and more endgame content, it's thankfully just made a great game even better. ■

Whips can only be unlocked by defeating the powerful Simon Belmont

FORMAL ATTIRE

The first three forms you'll acquire



WOLF FORM

Before you find a horse, using the Wolf form will be the quickest way to traverse the map.



RAT FORM

Rat form is useful for going undercover in human settlements, and annoying your fellow players.



BEAR FORM

Using Bear form is one of the only ways to break larger rocks and gates in the early game.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Out of Early Access *V Rising's* full release is more of the same, but better – exactly what it needed to be.

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PLOD OF WAR

SENUA'S SAGA: HELLBLADE 2 fails to find a new path for its hero

By Robin Valentine

In retrospect, the original *Hellblade* was never going to be an easy game to make a sequel to. Protagonist Senua's personal journey to self-acceptance was introduced and fully resolved, and most of the events of the story were seemingly hallucinations. That doesn't give you a lot to springboard off into a wider world, and indeed *Hellblade 2: Senua's Saga* struggles throughout to rise to that challenge.

Seeking to stop the Viking raids on her homeland at their source, Senua allows herself to be captured and brought to Iceland, with bloody vengeance on her mind. But she arrives to find a cursed land where the people live in fear of man-eating giants and, now trapped in Iceland herself, resolves to track down and slay them, recruiting the aid of local people and weirder allies as she goes. For the player, that means about eight hours of cutscenes, lightly interactive set-pieces, puzzles and sword fights.

It's a visually spectacular world. The landscape is scanned in from the real world using photogrammetry, and Iceland's bleak but beautiful vistas are just as startling and strange as any alien planet or fantasy realm. Mocap is used to phenomenal effect, both in the subtle performances of the human characters, and the deeply

unsettling movements of the giants. There's a robust photo mode, and I couldn't help but snap shots of every horizon, skybox and character close-up. And it all runs smooth as butter, on my machine at least, with no bugs or stuttering or even a loading screen along the way.

But what kind of world are we in, here? The dark fantasy setting creates an immediate disconnect with what *Hellblade* is supposed to be about.

There are still metaphors at play, but it all seems to be physically real

MIND GAMES

The series' focus is the idea that we're seeing the world from the perspective of someone with severe psychosis – Senua hears voices in her head relentlessly, and her reality is utterly distorted. The first game seemed to be a journey into her own mind. When she fought terrifying undead warriors, the implication was they were simply human Vikings

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cinematic dark fantasy adventure across 10th century Iceland

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Ninja Theory

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
senuassaga.com

seen through her terrified eyes, and her confrontation with the Norse god Hela was really a confrontation with her own reluctance to process grief.

But though Senua is certainly still hearing voices, she now seems to be in a world of actual monsters and magic, phenomena observed and confirmed by other people around her. There are still metaphors at play, but it all seems to be physically real too. Iceland has its own undead Vikings, for example, and perhaps these too are not quite as they appear, but the locals call them monsters, name them draugr, and confirm that they eat people, so there's little room for interpretation.

The entire concept of Senua becomes muddled. If myth is real, why should we assume any of what she experiences is hallucination, rather than actual magic? How is a distinction between what's real and what isn't meaningful if impossible things can happen in either world? And if she really can stand up to gods, then were the events of the first game all literal after all?

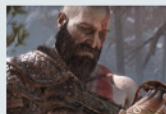
HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE

It's a jarring symptom of a wider problem, which is that Senua simply feels out of place in her own sequel. Where the first game was deeply personal to her character, in this story she feels like she's wandered into a sidequest in a setting she has no connection to. With her arc of self-discovery already completed, she doesn't have a meaningful journey left to go on, and half the time it feels like she's pushing on out of habit.

Even the performance seems out of place. That's no slight to Melina Juergens as Senua – she's as intense and surprising as ever, with advanced tech giving her more opportunity for expression through the mocap. But she's now surrounded by much subtler, more naturalistic characters, and her heightened delivery clashes, emphasising the feeling that she's an alien to this world.

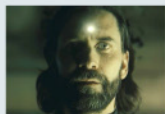
MORE THORS

Further Viking adventures



GOD OF WAR

This series revival was a clear inspiration for *Hellblade 2*, but does a much better job of balancing cinematic storytelling and emotional depth.



ALAN WAKE 2

Despite its setting, this brilliantly strange and inventive survival horror game is shot through with Nordic culture and mythology, thanks to its Finnish developer.



ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA

Though over-stuffed with busywork, *Valhalla's* open world is still an astonishing feat of development, and the atmosphere is spot on.



CRUSADER KINGS III

Why play just a single Viking when you can build an entire empire of them, and bring the soft-bellied Christian kingdoms to their knees?



Melina Jeurgens, who plays Senua, is as electric as ever – but she's not given enough chance to shine.



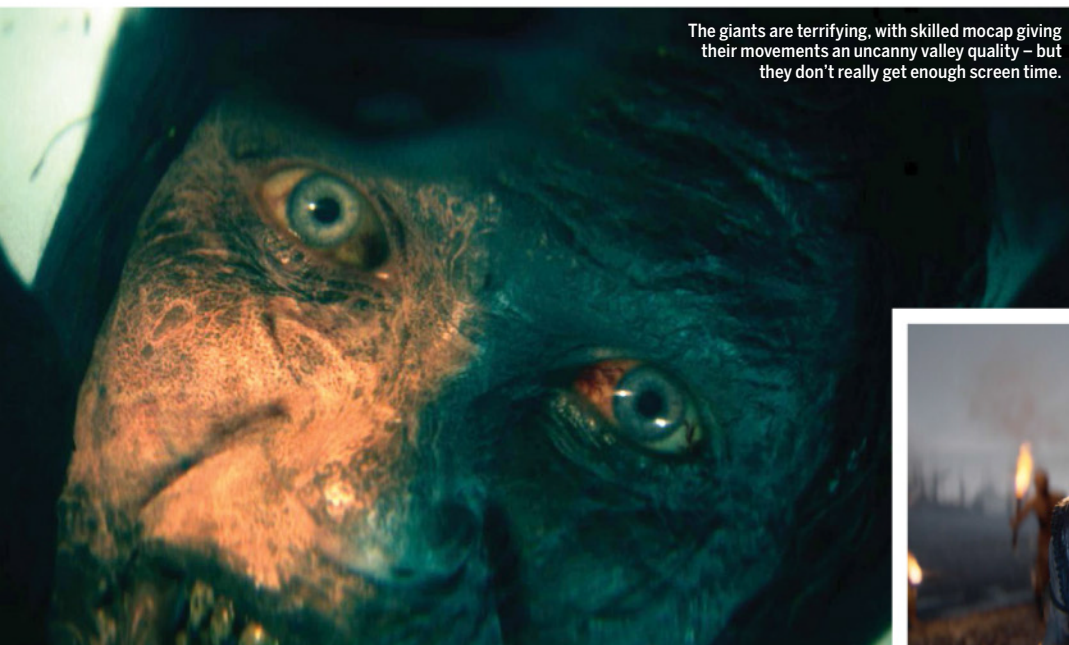
LEFT: In one sequence you're heaped with praise for finding the way through a magical forest, even though there's just one clear path. Patronising.



BELOW: Battles are visually exciting and surprisingly brutal, but you have very little actual control, and enemies will only fight you one at a time.



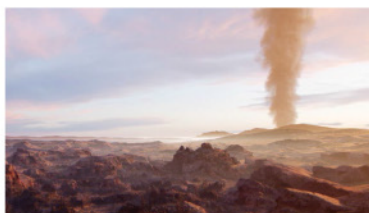
The giants are terrifying, with skilled mocap giving their movements an uncanny valley quality – but they don't really get enough screen time.



RIGHT: More lore can be learned by seeking out hidden collectibles, though they're not easy to find.



BELOW: Senua taking some time out from navigating disturbing hellscape to play a few matches of Scandi basketball.



That might have worked as a deliberate touch if the story was about Senua as a stranger in a strange land, but that doesn't seem to be what it's going for. Instead, it's about her becoming a hero to the local people, and the difficulties and burden of leadership. That's really not a role that Senua is able to slide into. She's quiet, haunted and erratic – with her grand feats in the story, it makes sense that she would inspire awe, fear, even respect, but as a leader she feels totally out of place, as does the speed with which the locals' wariness turns to devotion.

NORSE PLAY

It feeds into an oddly patronising atmosphere – Senua is special and important just because she is and everyone recognises it on sight and praises her for it. It starts to seem like she's a Make-A-Wish child whose request was to be in *God of War*. It's a feeling made far worse by the very rudimentary mechanics.

You're constantly being told that you, as Senua, are accomplishing incredible feats and doing things no one else could have done – the reality is that most of the time you're just holding forward on the stick, or doing puzzles a child could solve, so it all feels deeply unearned. The occasional battles are a little tougher, but still stripped down and simplified even from the first game. You only ever fight enemies one-on-one, and all are beaten with just a simple toolset of a fast attack, strong attack, parry, dodge and slow mo power. There's no nuance to be found beyond learning each of the handful of enemy types' attack patterns.

Simple mechanics aren't inherently a bad thing, of course. The game is clearly aspiring to a cinematic feel, rather than the kind of system mastery demanded in previous games from Ninja Theory such as *Enslaved* or *DMC*. And it does have the visual chops to swing for something like that.

It's always gorgeous, often truly breathtaking, and there are a few moments where the sheer spectacle of what you're seeing does convince you that you're playing the part of this incredible warrior. Some of the encounters with the giants in

particular are terrifying and really give a sense of tiny little humans battling immortal, elemental forces. It's an impressive feat of both design and technology, pulling off sights very few studios could even hope to match. With the right story behind it, it could perhaps have got away with such a thin veneer of interactivity, but

You're never allowed to wonder about what a line might mean

in a tale all about accomplishing the impossible, it feels absurd that more often than not all you're really accomplishing is walking and pressing a button.

And despite that visual approach to the storytelling, there's an awful lot of breaking the rule of 'show, don't tell'. The voices in Senua's head, though atmospheric (and particularly creepy if you wear headphones), constantly over-explain what's happening in a story that would hugely benefit from some moments of quiet.

You're never allowed to wonder about what a line might mean, or the significance of a particular facial expression or gesture, because the voices are there to talk all over it like YouTubers making a Let's Play. It's a problem the first game had, but it's exacerbated here by how disconnected Senua and her psychosis are from the narrative. With no new personal backstory to build on or anxieties to work through, they don't really have anything of substance to talk about. Even Senua just flat out ignores them most of the time.

But the problem extends beyond the voices. Through the Icelandic characters, we're told about the effect the giants are having far more than we see it, and Senua's more mystical allies are able to simply relate to her the backstory and weaknesses of all of her greatest foes whenever she's en route to challenge them. There's never a sense that either she or the player need to figure something out or speculate on a clue.

A DULLED BLADE

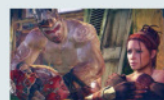
The only thing that leaves you to really ponder on is the game's broader themes, but they're too disjointed to inspire much analysis. Narrative threads related to leadership, parents, betrayal, and redemption drift in and out of the plot without ever really feeling relevant to anything Senua is going through, and the revelations of the climax are a culmination of ideas that weren't really explored sufficiently in the lead up. Often it feels like chunks of the story are missing, especially in the character arcs of the supporting cast, some of which feel rushed while others are abandoned.

As with the first game, in the lead up to *Hellblade 2* huge emphasis has been placed in the marketing on the authenticity of the depiction of psychosis. I don't have the personal experience to say whether it is representative or not – I'll leave that to others – but what I can say is that I don't think Senua's psychosis feels relevant to the story this game is telling. It isn't really even a psychological tale – it's a dark fantasy parable with some surreal imagery that evokes but doesn't actually explore the idea of distorted reality.

That's a sign that the first game didn't need a sequel at all, or certainly not one on this scale. *Hellblade 2* was always an odd fit as a flagship title for a publisher as big as Microsoft, and perhaps that pressure to go bigger, more epic, and more mainstream was too much for Senua to carry on her shoulders. Whatever the case, visual spectacle and intricate motion capture can't save this sequel from feeling like an inessential adventure. ■

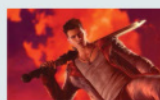
WAY OF THE NINJA

More fun with past games from the studio



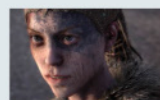
ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST

Of course the developer that loves mocap has collaborated with mocap legend Andy Serkis. He starred in this unique retelling of *Journey to the West* that moved the story to an apocalyptic future.



DMC: DEVIL MAY CRY

It's not well-liked by dedicated *DMC* fans, and it took the series in a very different direction – but take it on its own merits and you'll find a brilliantly in-your-face adventure that's bursting with creative combat.



HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE

The first game is smaller in scope, but much more focused, building its story completely around Senua's psychological state. Though it has its flaws, there's still an unforgettable journey on offer.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Senua's Saga: Hellblade 2 from Ninja Theory is a muddled tale that Senua herself feels out of place in.

58

NUNBELIEVABLE

Starring a Russian Orthodox nun, **INDIKA** takes a lot of risks, but mostly succeeds

By Shaun Prescott

Indika is a misfit Russian Orthodox nun on a mission. She's tasked with delivering a note to the Danilov monastery, which is a welcome reprieve, because the other nuns in her own monastery hate her guts. Little wonder, though: she's not a very good nun.

The trip is fated to go spectacularly wrong, and that's no spoiler, because the tone of *Indika* immediately warns us that we've entered a redemption-free zone. Across the six hours it took me to complete, our doomed hero moves through a succession of bleak, dehumanising environments, solves a bunch of puzzles, survives some utterly miserable encounters, fails to achieve anything she set out to do, and then must go on living. It didn't make me feel good, but I loved it all the same.

Indika's evocation of late-19th century Russia is daubed with horror-inflected surrealism: the narrow slush-flooded lanes of the monastery are shaded by sagging cupolas, and outside the monastery's walls everything is bizarrely oversized, even the mangy dogs. The world is pockmarked with

unexplainable chasms and knotty architecture. Ruin is ubiquitous, though we're never told why.

What kind of game is *Indika*? Remove its tonally kaleidoscopic habit and it's a narrative-driven third-person adventure with environmental puzzles. The puzzles

aren't always brilliant or original, but they are at least varied, and utilise the unconventional environments in interesting ways. It has some chase sequences with trial-by-error choices, and there's a platforming sequence involving giant dead fish that I downright hated. *Indika* can't shoot, punch, crouch or jump, but there's a prayer button.

While its thematic concerns feel Dostoyevskian, *Indika's* presentation more closely resembles the kitchen sink postmodernism of '90s film, that

The world is pockmarked with chasms and knotty architecture

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Third-person puzzle-centric adventuring starring a jilted Russian Orthodox nun

EXPECT TO PAY
£21

DEVELOPER
Odd Meter

PUBLISHER
11 Bit Studios

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600H,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3060

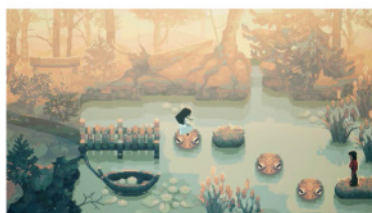
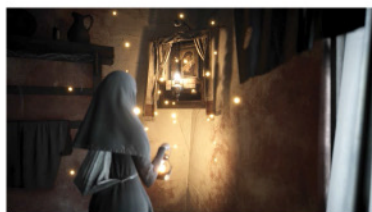
MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
indikathegame.com

decade of showy contrasts when you could put breakbeats in mediaeval capers and no one would bat an eyelid. For the Eastern Europe heads there's also traces of Tarkovsky, and a hint of the dejected humour found in *Pathologic 2* and the novels of Laszlo Krasznahorkai. In other words, *Indika's* atmosphere draws from a variety of sources that are unusual for games to draw from, bolstering its weirdness to great effect.

But that's not all! *Indika's* present-day journey is punctuated by a series of flashbacks taking the form of pixel art minigames referencing *Pac-Man*, *Micro Machines* and *Frogger*, among others.

NUNSENSICAL STATS

The game's flagrant tonal disjuncture is one of the reasons for *Indika's* pre-release notoriety. It serves a greater purpose than flair, because *Indika* has some fun but ambiguous metatextual ambitions. For example, there's an RPG stats system which lets me cash in points for various undesirable attributes such as guilt and grief. I'm twice warned by loading screen tips that the points mean nothing, and it's true that



ABOVE: The visual style of the game changes at times, leaning into its eclectic tone and injecting it with some weird vibes.



"No, Indika, you may not have one of my McNuggets."

Oppressive
visuals and tricky
puzzles abound.



ABOVE: There's a harsh, bleak beauty about environments.

FAR RIGHT: One of the game's delightfully weird pixel art minigames.

levelling has no noticeable effect in-game. *Indika* appears to use XP as a form of spiritual currency, but this is a game that revels in ambiguities designed to tease questions rather than bludgeon with meaning.

By contrast, it can also lapse into didacticism. During one of the game's most disturbing scenes, *Indika* exhorts her devilish alter-ego to "convince me that I haven't done anything bad." The alter-ego scolds her for irrational adherence to religious commandments, which is probably music to her ears.

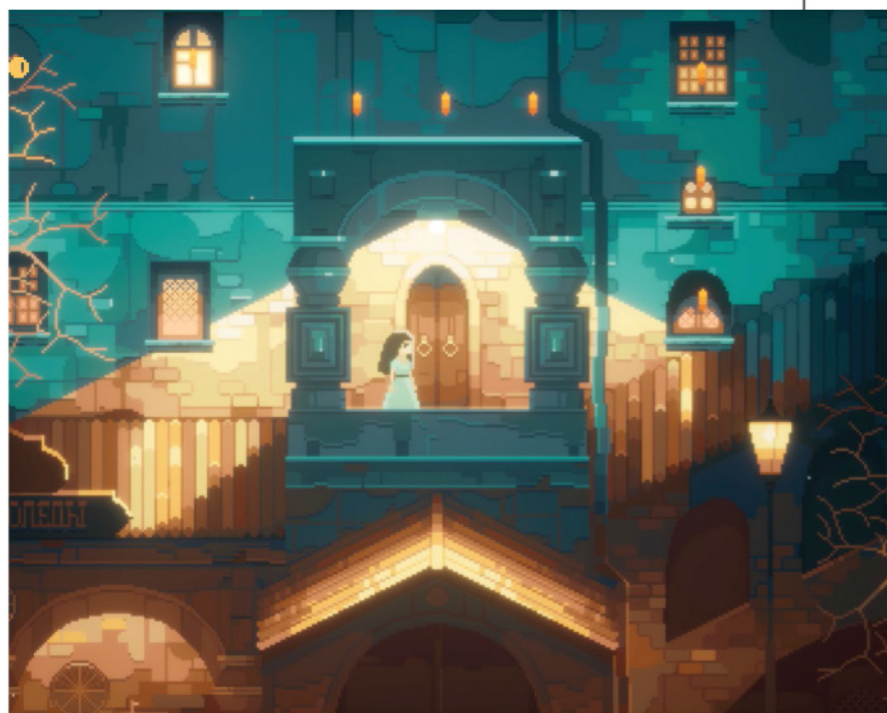
So it's a mesmeric narrative achievement, but does it cope as a game? The brevity here and the hopeless mood might be deal breakers. But I respect how *Indika* doesn't linger on some of its more interesting puzzle ideas for the sake of fleshing out the runtime.

Indika takes some wild tonal risks but mostly plays it safe when it comes to the stuff you do with your hands. And even if it's not always successful, the cumulative effect is a game that manages to mash together a bunch of familiar elements into a new form that's disquieting and gratifyingly obtuse. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A bizarre, confronting and darkly funny descent into hell, *Indika* takes a lot of risks and mostly sticks the landing.

79

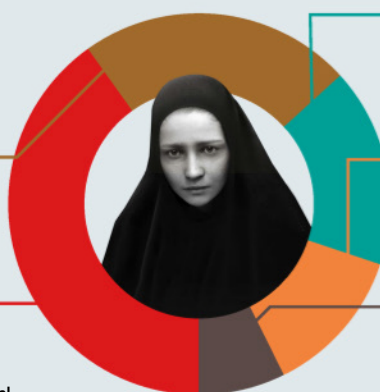


CREATURE OF HABIT

What Indika mostly does

23% EXPLORATION
Scoping out and progressing through moody environments.

40% PUZZLES
The backbone of the gameplay is made of puzzles, environmental and otherwise.



17% CONVOS
Indika chats to multiple people throughout the game.

13% CHASES
Occasionally there are chases with trial-and-error choices to make.

7% PLATFORMING
There's a platforming sequence involving giant dead fish.

WAR SOMETIMES CHANGES

MEN OF WAR II will scratch an itch for those who like their strategy mechanically dense

By Jake Tucker

The more things change, the more they stay the same. *Men of War II* layers in new deck-building elements and some shiny graphics alongside a wedge of singleplayer and multiplayer options but, beyond that, this sequel offers the same thing the franchise always has: brutal, shocking violence that can see scores of your forces wiped out in an instant.

This is what *Men of War II* does best. No other strategy game in this recent real-time strategy resurgence can deliver moments quite like it: a single soldier on a mounted machine-gun holding off a hundred enemy infantry, a lucky artillery shell wiping out a terrifying enemy tank, or a brave paratrooper demolishing your opponent's defences by crawling up to a defensive line with a satchel filled with explosives.

These moments will leave you feeling elated, and crafting a dynamic sandbox in which they can happen is a massive achievement. Original developer BestWay, returning for its first entry into the series since 2008's *Men of War*, shows a deft eye for creating drama out of what could be meaningless death.

Combat in *Men of War II* feels mechanically deep and incredibly

satisfying when you get it right. Instead of the traditional rock, paper, scissors style balancing found in many RTS games, *Men of War II* is even simpler. Bullets will kill most infantry without issue, bigger bullets

– say from an anti-aircraft gun or vehicle cannon – will shred light armour, and explosions will kill basically anything if you hit it right, whether that's a Panther tank or a squad of riflemen.

Direct control returns, and allows you to take command of a unit and tool them around yourself. There's a real joy to taking your own shots as a sniper or going hands-on with your anti-tank gun to wangle a round into the tracks of approaching enemies.

Fights are large-scale affairs and death is a constant. For every dizzying high, there's a corresponding low as your expensive

Fights are large-scale affairs and death is a constant

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Rock-hard
real-time strategy

EXPECT TO PAY
£38

DEVELOPER
Best Way

PUBLISHER
Fulcrum Publishing

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5800X,
32 GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/1128860/Men_of_War_II

artillery piece is hit by an errant tank shell, or a squad of your best and brightest soldiers gets caught in the open by an airstrike. These losses could feel meaningless given how often your valiant little guys get turned into jam, but because you're often working with such tight resources it's harrowing to lose units you know you can't replace. That feeling in your gut teaches you to respect (and fear) the terrifying destructive potential of pretty much the entire arsenal.

As battles progress, the beautifully crafted maps stop being just a collection of flora, rocks and buildings, and instead become naught but a collection of vantage points, kill zones and fatal funnels. Correctly fortified, these points could hold off an entire army, but there's a chaotic energy to the game that means that just about anything can happen. Several times I clicked away on the map to check out another area on the front line, coming back just in time to see that an enemy soldier with a can-do attitude has ruined my entire battleplan and reduced my defences to a smoking crater and human detritus. With the new graphics, these body-filled locales look better than ever before, and it goes a long way to selling the sheer meat grinder that every match turns into.

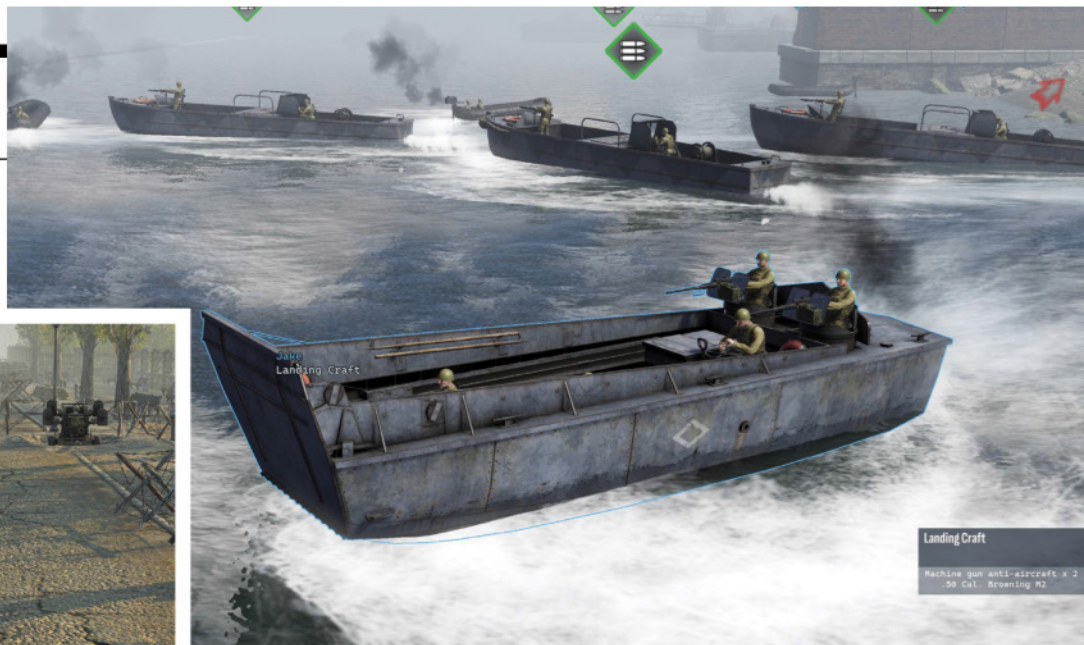
BREAKING SUPPLY LINES

When everything comes together, it creates thrilling battles of attrition. While the skirmishes in *Men of War II* feel bigger than ever for the series, a tight cap on how many units you can actually call in (and the resources you'll need before you're able to call things in) means that you constantly felt starved for troops. After a particularly bad loss in an area I often found myself unable to bring in reinforcements, turning everything into a hopeless scramble for survival as you send a few scattered and ill-equipped infantry to try and tackle whatever godless killing

ON THE MARCH

The average *Men of War II* match





ABOVE: Boatally awesome, dude.

FAR LEFT: John Soldier is starting to regret his job as crate carrier.

BELOW: Messy business, war.





ABOVE: You'll forget nearly every story beat within seconds, and that's OK.

FAR RIGHT: Lights make night fighting atmospheric.

BELOW: This is about to be the funniest carjacking of all time.



machine has just broken through your front line.

New units are slowly unlocked over time. You are first able to call in the First Echelon soldiers, then you can call in a greater number of more equipped Second and Third Echelon troops, these Echelons effectively gating your higher-powered units behind a timer. These

moments create a small surge as you can finally call in a big tank or an artillery piece that you think could change the flow of the battle.

Generally though, I found most battles become much less

intense after first contact. Most matches end not with a bang but with a whimper, as your dribble of surviving troops desperately tries to advance the front lines.

Similarly, the story-led campaign gives you so little to work with resource-wise that every death feels like something you should quickload to get around. An enemy sniper can take out several infantry before you can properly react, and when you're playing with a fairly small fighting force, it often feels like you're setting yourself up for failure. I played several missions in the story-driven campaigns and sampled a bit of the Russian, German and US missions, as each of the three have a unique storyline, but I frankly found that they just irritated me. The set-pieces were impressive, but with so little room for error, there's not a lot of room for experimentation.

This was less of an issue in the game's other campaigns – which include both dynamic and procedurally-generated examples

– but there was always a constant nagging feeling that there just weren't enough troops to do what I wanted to do. A skill issue, yes, but I've put hundreds of hours into *Men of War Assault Squad* and never felt this in the previous games.

INNOVATE AND DIE

The big new addition to *Men of War II* is the battalion system. This allows you to bring multiple battalions with different selections of units into the game's two dynamic campaigns, as well as to the wealth

of multiplayer matches on offer. These battalions are pretty self-explanatory: an artillery battalion will have a lot of artillery, while players selecting a tank led option will no doubt be unsurprised to find themselves knee-deep in tanks.

Battalions can also be edited and have rules not unlike the faction system seen in Eugen's *Wargame* series, meaning that your infantry deck can have a lot of diverse options and your tank battalion will, at the risk of overegging one joke, have several tons of tank to choose from. To do this you need to get currency – either from completing achievements or just completing matches – and then sub units out one by one. It's byzantine, and while it will no doubt be appreciated by the sort of people who play games like this for years, I actually prefer the idea of having some boundaries, and found this deck building overwhelmed me with choice.

You can see this in the two procedurally generated campaigns

too. Conquest allows you to bring several different battalions on a romp across Europe, with a battle each turn. Raid is a smaller-scale affair, generating 16 maps for you to fight through. Raid is billed as being more accessible, but because both require you to research new technology and then build a deck over time, it still feels very involved. Still, these dynamic options should be more replayable than the narrative campaign, and give players that do want to tweak and prod with their battalions a perfect toybox.

For me, I found myself wishing I could just upgrade my technology and then have units automatically built into my battalion for me to play with, rather than trying to work out, sight unseen, which would be best for me to take out to war.

ONWARDS TO VICTORY

Despite these missteps, it's hard not to enjoy what *Men of War II* is putting down. While World War II has proven to be fertile ground for the RTS genre, Bestway has created an uncompromising and compelling RTS here. Sadly, many of the new additions to the *Men of War* formula don't feel particularly necessary. As bizarre as it feels to say, I find myself wishing that Bestway had tried to reinvent the wheel less, and built more upon the brutal combat that underpins the game.

Instead, *Men of War II* is an uneven package. There's no denying the wealth of stuff here: the game is full to bursting for RTS fans willing to learn the razor-wire covered ropes. I had a lot of fun, and despite how punishing it was I found myself eager to hop in again and again. I want to unlock all of the different battalions and see how they feel in combat, and I'm even tempted to spend more time in the game's multiplayer, despite knowing I'll get battered.

Not that losing would be a surprise. Failure comes in many forms in *Men of War II*, and failure can be fun. Sadly, several flaws combine to make *Men of War II* difficult to love despite the tight mechanics that hold it together. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Men of War II is a flawed but rewarding gem for masochistic RTS players. Casual RTS fans may be left frustrated, though.

74

The story-led campaign gives you so little to work with, resource-wise

MEN OF MANY WARS

But a few of the games in this long-running series



SOLDIERS: HEROES OF WORLD WAR II 2004

Interestingly, the first game in this series does not share its name.



MEN OF WAR 2008

The first game in the series to use the 'Men of War' naming convention. Takes place during World War II.



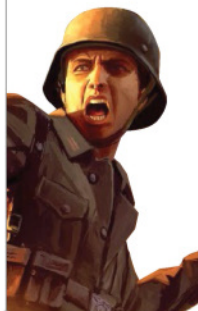
MEN OF WAR: ASSAULT SQUAD 2011

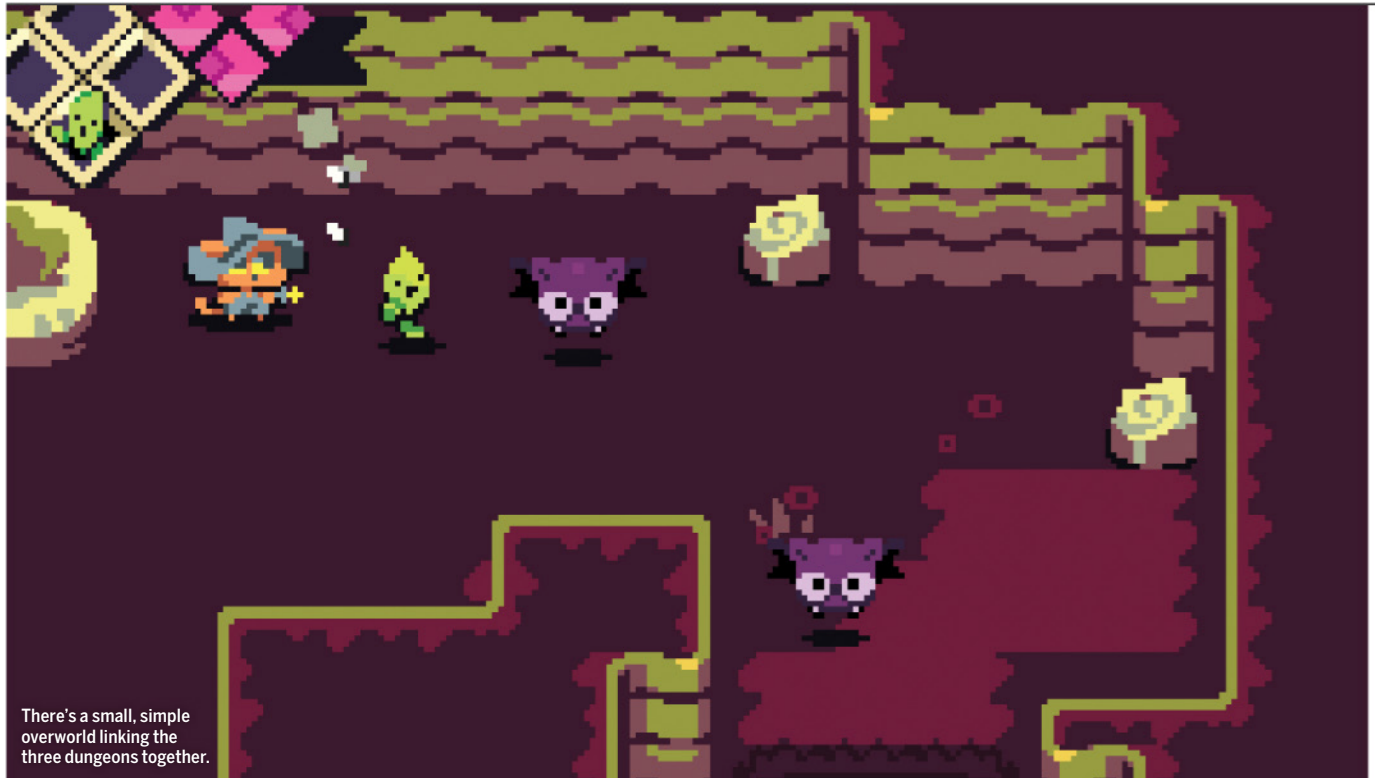
A more infantry-focused entry to the series, building on the *Men of War* game engine.



MEN OF WAR: ASSAULT SQUAD II - COLD WAR 2019

A DLC expansion where you control either American or Soviet troops.





SPELLBOUND

GLOBEBA is a great Zelda-like with an awful name

If, like me, you've been craving a new *Zelda* game – and you're reluctant to prise open your wallet – then *Globeba* is the one you're looking for. Yep, terrible name, but it conceals a sizeable game complete with three dungeons and an overworld – and some of its own ideas atop the familiar framework. It begins with your spellbook being stolen by the obligatory evil wizard. To recover it, you'll have to re-learn four vital spells.

The first is sitting nearby, summoning leaves you can use to slash at enemies and breakable things. The second lets you create a pushable puzzle block from thin air. *Globeba* is puzzle-focused, sprinkling enemies round varied puzzles that will have you shunting blocks onto floor switches, or dispatching walking bombs (that's the third spell) to trigger distant levers. It's all very *A Link to the Past*, and it's a competent imitation, especially in regard to its large, fairly intricate dungeons.

These are the old style of *Zelda* dungeons, pre-*Breath of the Wild*. They're split up into boxy rooms filled with locked doors, switches, enemies and obstacles, and overcoming them requires clever use

of your abilities. The puzzles are strong here, with the occasional stumper that stopped me in my tracks, but never for too long.

As you acquire more spells, the dungeons become more impressive, culminating in a final area that puts everything you've learned to the test. I'm particularly enamoured by the final spell, which lets you swap places with objects, or teleport yourself across the room. There are

some clever puzzles that make good use of this final power.

As you acquire more spells, the dungeons become more impressive

MAPPED OUT

What the dungeons lack is any sort of map, which can make navigating them an absolute chore, particularly when you die and all the enemies and

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A top-down *Zelda*-style game starring a cute moggy mage

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Team Bugulon

PUBLISHER
Team Bugulon

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/globeba

many puzzle elements respawn. At least there's a checkpoint before every boss (I'm looking sideways at all the Soulslikes now), so you don't have to repeat exploration beats while learning the bosses' patterns.

Lack of map aside, this is one of the strongest *Zelda*-likes I've played in a long time, albeit on a much smaller scale. The pixel art is adorable, while there's a slickness to the action and interface that you don't always find with games inspired by the 16-bit era. I've never seen this in a game before, but *Globeba*'s HUD will politely shift out of the way if you walk to the top-left of the screen.

Don't do what I did and binge the game over a single day. I only did so because I had no idea if *Globeba* had save games (turns out it does). It's probably a couple of hours long, but you should savour it, as it's a rare thing indeed: a *Zelda* game that can compare well to the real thing. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

No Nintendo console? No problem. Get your *Zelda* fix with this short, sweet game, though you'll be left wanting more.

79

BELOW: I don't remember *Diablo*'s Tristram having a sauna.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
bippinbits

LINK
bit.ly/TristramGame

TRISTRAM SHANDY

Delegate *Diablo* in **TRISTRAM**

You'd probably agree that Tristram was the best part of *Diablo*: the demon-ravaged town where you could stay a while and enjoy one banger of a guitar track. But what if you could stay a long while, and let other adventurers do all the dungeon crawling? That's the premise of management game *Tristram*.

Essentially, you play as Deckard Cain, who is trying to save the town by summoning warriors to it. This you achieve by blowing a summoning horn, then ringing a bell to gather your adventurers at the dungeon. As they chip away at it automatically, they'll bring back gold to spend in the shops afterwards, improving their chances and boosting the economy.

It's odd to play an action RPG where you have so little input over combat or character development.

You can't outfit your warriors, who will pop to the shops of their own volition and fight monsters while you sip your tea, but you will choose which ones to hire, and you do have some say over party compositions.

Once inside the dungeon, the view switches to three side-on lanes, as your three parties hack their way towards each area's boss, and ultimately the big bad that trounced the town in the first place.

It doesn't make much sense, clearing three versions of the dungeon simultaneously, but I suppose it makes use of all the heroes idling about. This is not a deep or challenging game, but it's worth it just to look at the town.

The adventurers stop to chat to each other, sit at the inn, and go for dips in the sauna and I could watch them bustle about all day. ■

60

THE WRIT CROWD

Warring with woodland folk in card game **THE ROYAL WRIT**

The *Royal Writ* is a charming card game, with a hand-drawn art style that imbues its woodland critters with abundant personality. My infantry look so adorable that I almost don't want to march them to their deaths. But it has to be done, and all to deliver the king's crummy letters.

The overworld map will be familiar to veteran slayers of spires, with every node granting either a new card or a battle that puts them into service. In *The Royal Writ*, you plonk your card-based soldiers onto horizontal lanes, then watch as they advance to the right of the screen.

Every turn, they do damage – a combination of their attack values, and of any cards that might be sitting behind them – with the total deducted from the enemy's health bar. If you take too long to empty

their HP, your cards will be destroyed as they bash into enemy territory, so you want to score big early on.

Handily, that's very easy, as the closer you are to the end of the lanes, the higher the points multiplier. You'll do twice as much damage in turn two, for example, then triple in turn three. Add in special cards that increase that multiplier even further and you'll be steamrolling every battle. It's a shame as there's an innovative combat system, which I enjoyed tinkering around with – if only the enemy had mounted any sort of defence. The charm saves the game: the badger with a mace marching headlong into battle, and the sibling cats who grieve each other when one is defeated.

I can't recommend it for the strategy, but what an exquisite set of playing cards. ■

BELOW: Every turn, your damage is multiplied.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Save Sloth Studios

LINK
bit.ly/RoyalWrit

55

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott



MANIAC MANSION

Reliving the dark history of Derceto in the original **ALONE IN THE DARK**

Few things match the excitement of going back to a classic game or movie. It's heightened in the case of *Alone in the Dark*, thanks to the recent remake reminding us just how important its brand of genre-defining horror was. And while interactive media rarely age as well as cinematic ones, there's still something magical about the first foray into Decerto.

I'm not going to lie to you. The structure and controls of the game will immediately count some players out. At times it's like trying to wrap a present with someone else's feet. And however much it influenced every scary game that followed, the original *Alone in the Dark* is, at its heart, a game about people in tailored clothes punching fleshless chickens in a mansion. Some of it, in all honesty, is a struggle. The structured gameplay we take for granted now is missing here, meaning it's ridiculously easy to get killed by the first few enemies you fight. Likewise, as you karate kick a zombie for the 15th time, it's unlikely that you'll be ruefully wishing that games were still made like this. Even the opening will be enough to put some players off.

Even the opening will be enough to put some players off

Your character trudges to the first playable area with all the urgency of an elderly couple standing in the doorway of Marks & Spencer, and it takes so long that anyone with a limited attention span will presume the game has broken.

HART ATTACK

But even within these obvious limitations, there's something about *Alone in the Dark* that feels perceptive, important and elegant. The writing is lovely, but in terms of content

and presentation (if celebrating a game's fonts isn't too much of a backhanded compliment). The presentation throughout is gorgeous: the verdant greens and burnt umbers are a reminder, somewhat ironically, that scary games weren't always dark and desaturated. And there's a

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
If Agatha Christie and HP Lovecraft made a game baby

EXPECT TO PAY
£11

DEVELOPER
Infogrames

PUBLISHER
THQ Nordic

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700,
16 GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/548090/Alone_in_the_Dark_1/

sense of place that's surprisingly powerful, even if it feels clumsy to play. The ominous music and croaking frogs in the intro impart a real sense of sinister and sticky Southern Gothic horror.

And even if the jumpscare doesn't make you jump and aren't that scary, it's impossible to see necrotic birds bursting through windows without wondering how frightening that must have been at the time. The weight of history helps, too: like the first time you see a Simpsons reference in the film it was taken from, there's something satisfying about knowing the origin of the best bits of the likes of *Resident Evil*.

The whole thing only lasts about an hour, barring any disasters, though it'll also seem longer, although given the glacial pace of movement and combat, that's not the complement it might seem. But despite this, it's worth experiencing. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Somehow cosy and crushing at the same time, *Alone in the Dark* is a piece of survival horror history.

75

BOTTOM: Karate chopping a baby: a new level of Miyazaki bleakness.



KUNAI, MONSTER

The savage rhythm action of **SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE**

It's nice to approach FromSoft games with a philosophical viewpoint. 'I'm lucky' might not be the first thought that comes to mind as you tumble into a murky pit full of headless ogres, but it's true. Somehow, against all expectations, Miyazaki's brand of grim belligerence has become a part of modern gaming.

There might be times where other, less positive thoughts creep into your head when playing *Sekiro*. One I frequently experience is the tired refrain of 'am I too old to actually play this?' Because unlike its Soulslike brethren, *Sekiro* feels like it has an inescapable skill cap. *Dark Souls*, by comparison, had options for every playstyle. Parrying was a thing you could ignore until you fought Gwyn at the end of the game. I know this, because it's exactly what I did, after

spending 60 hours hiding behind the biggest shield I could find. There's no such comfort here. It's gripping, kinetic, high-stakes combat, which at times feels like the unholy union of beat-'em-up and rhythm action game. One failure isn't always enough to end you, but the level of threat feels consistently high. That said, there are times when it feels less punitive than its forebears. The fact levelling is tied to boss battles removes that lurking fear of building a useless character. There's a uniformity to progression that suggests you can beat the obstacle you're struggling with, even if it currently seems impossible. And where I was able to brute force some elements of Miyazaki's other games, there's an inescapable pride that comes with progressing in *Sekiro*, even if you know it's just dancing with swords. ■

90

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£49.90

DEVELOPER
FromSoftware

PUBLISHER
Activision

GHOST NOTES

Saxes and spectral apparitions in **BLACKWELL UNBOUND**

There's something extremely comforting about *Blackwell* games. Even if they often deal with big, challenging themes like death and displacement, the pace and presentation of them always feels like a pleasure. Even the audio design, with its soft, warm, fuzzy voices, is like being haunted by the ghost of Bob Ross.

The second *Blackwell* game takes us back to 1970s New York, and acts as a prequel to the *Blackwell Legacy*. It has that gentle paranormal investigation feel that few people nail in the same way as Dave Gilbert. And even though the style of game and platform seems dated, there are always flourishes, such as the ability to switch between characters, that make it more than just another adventure game. It's also a brilliant character study: there's direct and

relatable friction between Rosa and her spectral accomplice, Joey, that recalls the sort of constant mild annoyance that comes from living with someone you have no influence over. Think of it like the housemate who leaves a foil lid on the kitchen worktop instead of throwing it away, but they're dead and can float through walls. Within the first five minutes you're faced with the sort of easygoing conundrums that really sell the functionality of the game. It's simple, human, amusing stuff, that gives a decent sense of place and time. But the games mix of lilting jazz and constant smoking really captures what I hope the city felt like, without all the fiscal crises and moral panic about crime. I presume there were fewer saxophone-playing ghosts, too, but I wouldn't be able to see them if they were there. ■

80

BELOW: Is it even an adventure without a phonebook-based conundrum?



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£4

DEVELOPER
Wadjet Eye Games

PUBLISHER
Wadjet Eye Games



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GROUP TEST

OLED GAMING MONITORS

A fresh wave of OLED panels brings fresh options, greater resolutions and makes for even more impressive gaming monitors

By Jacob Ridley



OLED gaming monitors deliver the most spectacular image quality. It would be a cop-out to say 'you have to see it to believe it', but you sorta do. The snappy response, vibrant colours and astonishing contrast blend together to create the most engrossing screens on the market right now. Few non-OLED gaming monitors come close.

A new wave of OLED gaming monitors has since arrived and are set on improving upon the first with thoroughly impressive panels. Most noteworthy has to be the arrival of 4K OLED gaming monitors, including the Alienware 32 AW3225QF, Gigabyte Aorus FO32U2, and Asus ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM. Though you will have to spend a pretty penny to secure any of them.





32 AW3225QF

ALIENWARE £989

The best 4K OLED

1 It's tough to fault the AW3225QF. A 32-inch gaming monitor fit with a sparkling new QD-OLED panel, it's a more attractive high-end gaming monitor than the Alienware AW3423DWF we've rated as the best gaming monitor for well over a year now. That's because it's a fully-fledged 4K panel and all the better for the extra DPI and detail that brings. The buff to the AW3225QF's resolution makes all the difference to its clarity and overall sharpness. Providing you have the GPU to push it, the 240Hz refresh rate and 0.03ms response times offer huge

opportunity to a competitive gamer, though an OLED gaming monitor is built for more than speed alone. The AW3225QF is vivid, rich and punchy. That's true of every single OLED gaming monitor included in this group test, but the AW3225QF feels that little bit punchier than the 4K OLED competition based on the same Samsung QD-OLED tech. The glossy coating helps heaps, too. I'd also bet it'll end up as one of the cheapest.

PC GAMER VERDICT

→ Punchy
→ Sharp
→ 4K is demanding

SPECS SIZE: 32-INCH / RESOLUTION: 3840 X 2160 / REFRESH RATE: 240HZ / RESPONSE TIME: 0.03MS /
PANEL: SAMSUNG QD-OLED 3RD GEN

MPG 271QRX

MSI £899

1440p premium

2 Broadly speaking, a 27-inch 1440p gaming monitor is the most sensible blend of size, resolution, performance and price for PC gaming. The 271QRX isn't that. It's anything but sensible, with a 360Hz refresh rate, 0.03ms response time and frightfully massive price tag. Let's start with the good bits. The Samsung-made panel within this MSI monitor is excellent in its response, vibrancy and contrast. It's also much easier to drive the 271QRX than almost any other OLED in this list, bar the Dough. The standard 1440p resolution is relatively easygoing for most

mid-range graphics cards and that means it's more accessible, to those with a slimmer budget. Though forget all about affordability, as this monitor is extremely expensive versus other 1440p panels. You can almost forgive a high-end OLED with a 4K or ultrawide resolution for its large price tag, but a 27-inch 1440p is a much tougher pill to swallow. That slim resolution may net you a high refresh rate, but it does suffer from text fringing.

PC GAMER VERDICT

→ Great for HDR
→ Fast
→ Expensive for 1440p

SPECS SIZE: 27-INCH / RESOLUTION: 2560 X 1440 / REFRESH RATE: 360HZ / RESPONSE TIME: 0.03MS /
PANEL: SAMSUNG QD-OLED 3RD GEN

4

2

3

GROUP TEST

Aorus FO32U2

GIGABYTE £1,258

A close runner-up

3 Much like the Alienware AW3225QF, Gigabyte has packed a 32-inch, 4K and Samsung-made OLED panel into the Aorus FO32U2. The response time, refresh rate and overall brightness are all the same, which means choosing between the two monitors comes down to other features, such as the stand, connectivity and warranty. The FO32U2 comes with a highly adjustable and stylish stand, and supports KVM for easy switching of peripherals between devices. The USB-C on this monitor isn't quite up to the same power delivery as I'd like, however, at only 18W. Though the

model with a 'P' suffix comes with a 65W port. Gigabyte has stuck a glossy coating on the FO32U2, which makes a huge difference to the impact of the OLED panel. However, the warmer calibration out of the box with this monitor isn't our favourite of the few 32-inch OLED gaming monitors using the same panel we've seen so far, and when there's similar competition, that's important. Yet if it's the cheapest of the lot, I'd definitely consider it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- 4K
- 3 years burn-in cover
- Warm calibration

SPECS SIZE: 32-INCH / RESOLUTION: 3840 X 2160 / REFRESH RATE: 240HZ / RESPONSE TIME: 0.03MS /
PANEL: SAMSUNG QD-OLED 3RD GEN

ROG Swift OLED PG34WCDM

ASUS £1,349

A new generation

4 The Swift PG34WCDM is the pick for anyone aiming for a reliably high refresh rate, alongside all the benefits of an OLED panel. The 3440 x 1440 resolution offered here is much easier on a graphics card than pure 4K, and that pairs nicely with the 240Hz refresh rate and 0.03ms response time often offered by this new wave of OLED panels. The PG34WCDM uses one of LG's latest OLED panels: the LG OLED MLA Gen 2. Traditionally, LG's panels can struggle to reach high levels of full-screen brightness, and to address that Asus has stuffed a fanless heatsink in the rear of the

PG34WCDM, with the aim to allow the screen to happily draw more power. Similarly, Asus has attempted to address text fringing with its own built-in algorithm. Asus has helped bridge the gap between LG- and Samsung-made OLED panels with the PG34WCDM. When there's a high contrast HDR image on screen, it looks absolutely fantastic, and it's even better suited for anyone chasing high refresh rates.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Attainable 240Hz
- Fantastic HDR
- Brightness only okay

SPECS SIZE: 34-INCH / RESOLUTION: 3440 X 1440 / REFRESH RATE: 240HZ / RESPONSE TIME: 0.03MS /
PANEL: LG WOLED MLA GEN2

HARDWARE

Group Test

FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT OLED MONITORS

Full-screen brightness

An OLED is brightest when only a small patch of the screen is lit up, and full-screen brightness is often much, much lower.

Text fringing

OLED tends to use an unusual subpixel layout, which means text can suffer from fringing, a sort of chromatic aberration effect. Higher pixel density does help reduce this, however.

OLED care

Burn-in is a concern with OLEDs. Built-in protections help keep an OLED safe but it's good to check if a manufacturer offers burn-in warranty cover, too.

LG or Samsung

There are two manufacturers actually making OLED panels. Generally, we've preferred the first few panels out of Samsung, though LG comes close. It could change very quickly with a new gen.

OLED is awesome

After listing all the things which OLED isn't very good at, it feels suitable to highlight why it's all worth it: OLED panels deliver an unrivalled image quality for gaming.

GLOSS COATINGS
MAKE OLED
MONITORS POP
IN A WAY THAT
MATTE COATINGS
COULD NEVER





GROUP TEST

ROG Swift OLED PG49WCD

ASUS **£1,399**

Dominating the desktop

5 The ultimate OLED gaming monitor? Perhaps, though that might instead be the almost identical Samsung Odyssey G9 OLED. The Asus is undoubtedly a mighty monitor, however, with an ultrawide frame stuffed with a 49-inch, 5120 x 1440, 144Hz QD-OLED. For gaming, it's something else. The size, contrast and vibrancy of this monitor entirely dominates your vision while playing any game that fully supports its wider than wide resolution. Despite its size, it's actually less demanding on graphics silicon than regular 4K. Though that does have its

downsides: the pixel density isn't as good as a 4K OLED, and that means it suffers from text fringing more noticeably than some. If Asus could drop the price of this monitor down below the equivalent monitor from Samsung, it'd be a great choice for an absurd high-end gaming set-up. However, the cost is a bit of a sticking point, and prevents this gaming monitor from being the one to buy, despite being absolutely awesome for gaming.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Engrossing
- Mega-wide
- Text fringing

SPECS SIZE: 49-INCH / RESOLUTION: 5120 X 1440 / REFRESH RATE: 144HZ / RESPONSE TIME: 0.03MS /
PANEL: SAMSUNG QD-OLED 3RD GEN

Spectrum Black 27

DOUGH **£1,199**

Look elsewhere

6 In isolation, there's a great deal to like about the Dough Spectrum Black. A near-instantaneous response time (as do most OLEDs), a gorgeously glossy panel and a 240Hz refresh rate. Yet the Dough fails to impress, as we've just come to expect more for the money with even the very latest OLED gaming monitors.

To be fair to the Spectrum Black, it does a few things better than others. For one its Gorilla Glass coating is fantastic; gloss coatings make OLED monitors pop in a way that matte coatings could never. The Spectrum Black also includes heaps of

connectivity features, including multiple HDMI 2.1 ports, a USB Type-C port capable of 100W power delivery and a KVM to make multi-device use much simpler. The build quality of the monitor is also superb. Though it's tough to ignore the array of 4K, 49-inch, or ultrawide options available with similar panels, specs, and prices. If I was looking to spend a four-digit sum on a gaming monitor, I'd be looking elsewhere than the Dough.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Feature rich
- Gorilla Glass
- Extreme price

SPECS SIZE: 27-INCH / RESOLUTION: 2560 X 1440 / REFRESH RATE: 240HZ / RESPONSE TIME: 0.03MS /
PANEL: LG W-OLED



QUEST FAILED

META'S VR financials reveal the platform's ongoing struggles

We're seldom compared to Warren Buffet at PCG. Two grand for a graphics card that'll be obsolete before the next general election? Add to basket. Five games that will remain unplayed for eternity, bought in a Steam sale? Another sound investment. And yes, absolutely do tell us more about that RGB gaming chair – we can always pay in instalments. With all that said, even we found our faces pinching into a tight wince when Meta released its latest VR division financials and revealed \$4.3bn going out and a whopping, er, \$440m coming back in.

Meta's first quarter report disclosed that Reality Labs, the artist formerly known as Facebook's VR department, showed a massive loss. Around 10% of its expenditure that quarter was recouped with profits, meaning the net loss was \$3.8bn. Before putting those numbers into context, the news seemed to fit an ongoing narrative about VR that extends beyond the Meta Quest, out into Apple's Vision Pro and Valve's Index. That narrative: put simply, consumers just aren't into virtual reality yet.

That's a big statement, so it makes the context of those fiscal numbers especially important. Why were Reality Labs' outgoings in excess of \$4bn, or as we know it 'the price of

three new Nvidia GPUs at launch'? Ironically, Meta's wider company financial figures did take a hit related to Jensen Huang's silicon, shelling out for a fleet of Nvidia H100 AI chips at an estimated \$20,000-\$40,000 each, but that spending spree shows up on a different division's balance sheet.

HEADCOUNT RELATED EXPENSES

As Meta itself said about the losses, which were down 1% versus last year, "Higher headcount related expenses were more than offset by lapping inventory related valuation adjustments and restructuring costs." So more on the payroll, more salaries going out. And the company's in no hurry to start generating a profit here, either, "We continue to expect operating losses to increase meaningfully year-over-year due to our ongoing product development efforts and our investments to further scale our ecosystem."

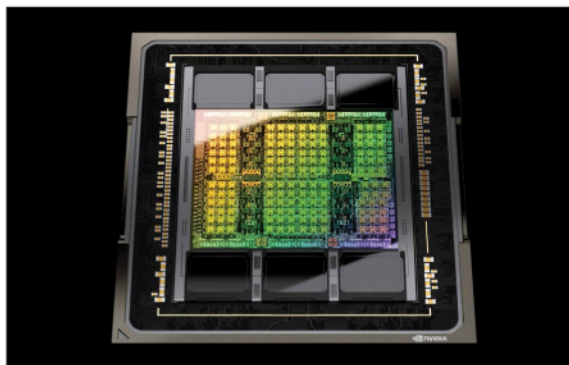
As for the profit generated, most of that comes from consumers buying Quest headsets and also contains Meta Quest Store revenue, and in total it's up from \$339m last year.

OK, context acquired then. People are buying the Quest 3, thanks in no small part to its relatively affordable £459 pricing compared to Valve and Apple's much costlier alternatives. About ten million of them a year, according to industry analyst estimates, and that figure's backed up by Meta's recent financials and Amazon's charts, in which the cheaper Quest 2 is the best-selling 'console' currently.



H-Bomb

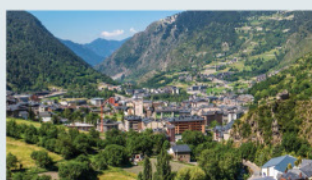
Nvidia's all-powerful Hopper GPU architecture, aka the H100 GPU, sells for somewhere between \$20,000-\$40,000 per chip and generated over \$14bn for the company in one quarterly period of 2023 alone. But it wasn't designed as a Skynet-invoking AI superchip. Instead it was an offshoot of the consumer graphics hardware the likes of which we like to get our noses into.



FAR LEFT: Nvidia's H100 is proving the more sought-after hardware of the moment.

LEFT: People are buying the Quest – but at what cost to Meta?

FOUR-PLAY *A quartet of better ways to spend \$4.3bn*



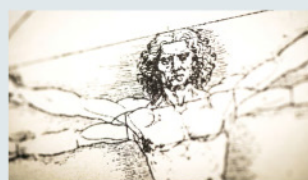
ANDORRA

The picturesque Iberian principality has gorgeous mountains aplenty, and a GDP of just \$3.3bn. A bargain.



BUCKINGHAM PALACE

London property prices, eh? Estimated at \$4.9bn, so you'll need to find an extra \$600m for King Charles' digs.



EIGHT DA VINCI PAINTINGS

Da Vinci's Salvador Muni sold at auction for \$450 million. Buy seven more and line the garage walls with them.



PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN FC

The Ligue 1 giant where Kylian Mbappé earns a living can be yours for \$4.21bn according to recent valuations.

There are very few companies in the world that can withstand such vast losses. It's a luxury that perhaps not even Meta itself is big enough to afford – the company saw about \$750bn of market capitalisation evaporate in 2022 after grey T-shirt enthusiast and semi-convincing organic lifeform Mark Zuckerberg went big on VR and the Metaverse in that disastrous Connect 2021 reveal. Meta's clawed itself back from the edge of collapse since then, but there's only so many times a company that big can get it that wrong. And in the end, it's not necessarily the VR headset sales themselves that indicate whether the technology's catching on, but the cost of those sales.

If it costs over \$4bn a year to pull back \$400m in sales, that's a company backing the wrong horse. We hear similar rhetoric from Apple's Vision Pro evangelists: the sales numbers are encouraging! Returns are relatively low! But that ignores the broader context: this is the second-biggest company on planet Earth trying to get you to do something. It's got considerable resources. Now with that in mind, is it such a big win that a company with \$2.6 trillion of financial might managed to force through 200,000 Vision Pro first year sales? Particularly when that company estimated the number would be more like three million?

While Meta's been pouring a continent's worth of GDP into VR, the real tech revolution happened. The large language model AI tools that now control our lives didn't need many billboard ads or keynotes to ascend right into the centre of our culture. It just happened. There are two really simple reasons it did: it's more convenient to use AI than not to, and it doesn't cost you anything.

**PUT SIMPLY,
CONSUMERS JUST
AREN'T INTO VIRTUAL
REALITY YET**

CONTRASTING EXPERIENCE

When you contrast the experience of visiting ChatGPT and asking it a question to paying £400+ on a massive pair of spectacles and some magic wands and then scouring a storefront for meaningful uses among an ocean of tech demos and video players, it's not a head-scratcher to see why one took off and the other is being pushed upon you like stinky leftovers.

Zuckerberg's lot know that. That's why they're stockpiling Nvidia H100 chips to the tune of an estimated \$7bn investment. It's why Zuckerberg, a mere three years after assuredly telling us the future looked like a nightmare Miiverse where we dine on NFTs together instead of living in reality, recently told the world of his intention to turn Meta into the "biggest AI company in the world". A remark that seemed to tank the company's share price, since it

dropped by 12% almost immediately.

The uptake speed of AI in contrast to VR tells us so much about consumer behaviour. Most pertinently, as PC gamers it tells us it's not just sentimentality that keeps us clinging jealously to a desktop machine and monitor, but convenience. This particular way we play games and live our virtual lives has endured because it actually works, and it's capable of adapting to our needs over time. AI plugs into that familiar experience, and its adoption rate has felt near-instant. VR demands we change everything about how we play, and year after year we're watching its peddlers try to convince us why it's not dead yet. ■

Phil Iwanik

SILICON DREAMS

Upgrading back when GPUs changed more than just framerates

Modern PC upgrades are a joy whose cost is far more financial than laborious: graphics cards cost as much as London houses now, but they're much easier to slot into your PC and for Windows to recognise them than they once were. There's a lot to love about slinging in a fresh GPU in 2024 and watching your framerates soar – but it can't compare to how utterly transformative a new graphics card was in the early days of 3D.

Let me set the scene: it's the summer of 2000. Most people are busy listening to Eminem and watching Survivor, but I don't have time for that because I'm about to build my first PC. I've been playing *Quake III Arena* for a year now with my Voodoo 2 and it's been like I'm peering at it through a periscope smeared in lip balm. Enough is enough.

It's time to put into motion a plan I've been hatching for some time, using the wisdom printed in PC Gamer's hardware section and various components from its many mail order ads. I'm going to build a new PC from scratch.

This being the dawn of the 2000s and basically still the pre-internet era, the process is something akin to trying to secure a mortgage while running late to a funeral. I'm sure it took years off my life, and my cortisol levels will take several decades to normalise, but I did it: a sexy beige and blue machine with a Pentium II and a Hercules 3D Prophet II. And as a special bonus feature that took me and several other neighbourhood kids weeks to achieve, when you press the power button it now turns on and boots to Windows. But it won't feel like the upgrade is complete until I load up *Quake III Arena*.

GRAPHICS ENGINES

Because I won't just be fragging Sarge, Phobos and Tank Jr in higher framerates. I'll be doing it in a game that looks, by

2024 standards, completely remastered. Id Software did graphics engines unlike anyone else in the industry, routinely shipping games with software renderers that could run their game without the need for a dedicated 3D graphics card.

In *Quake III Arena*'s case, there was no software mode this time, nor a Direct3D renderer. Id Tech 3 was all OpenGL-based, with separate modes for Voodoo and non-Voodoo cards. My wizened old Voodoo 2 was doing its best with those earth-shattering textures and intricately sculpted bits of architectural gore, but its limitations meant that the game that appeared somewhat apologetically on my monitor didn't look much like the one in all the screenshots I'd been drinking in from the pages of PCG.

So as soon as my Franken-PC boots to Windows, I shove in the *Quake III* disc and watch an installation bar inch across the screen, imagining all the ways it might crash when I try to launch it. I double and triple-check that I've correctly installed the drivers from CD-ROM, obsessively revisiting Windows 98's Device Manager. And then there's nothing more to be done. It's time. I double-click the desktop icon.

WHEN YOU PRESS THE POWER BUTTON IT TURNS ON AND BOOTS TO WINDOWS

EYE-POPPING

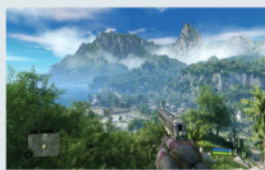
There's never been a more eye-popping, night-and-day difference in my long career of PC upgrading than that first glimpse of full-bore OpenGL *Quake III*. It doesn't even take as long as the first match, I notice it in the character select screen. Suddenly I can see incredible facial details and shiny surfaces. The details on Biker's gross beer-belly tattoos. The blue-white glow of Slash's inexplicable futuristic roller blades. Finally, my *Quake III* looks like the *Quake III* in the magazine pages. I feel almost starstruck.

Fast-forwarding 24 years and scanning through numerous new component installations and complete builds, nothing's come close to that enormous fidelity jump in *Quake III*. But modern AI-based rendering techniques offer something at



PHIL IWANIUK
Veteran games writer Phil Iwaniuk recently showed us his own 'build from scratch', a protégé intended to take over his empire. So far it's a calculator duct-taped to a roller skate.

GAME CHANGERS Moments that changed everything in graphics



DIRECTX 10

Full of post-processing effects capabilities, DX10 games just looked different to DX9. Unfortunately, it was tied to Windows Vista. Vomit.



HIGH REFRESH RATE MONITORS

Turns out it's not just the pixels that appear on your screen, it's how they're delivered. 120Hz was a moment, for all.



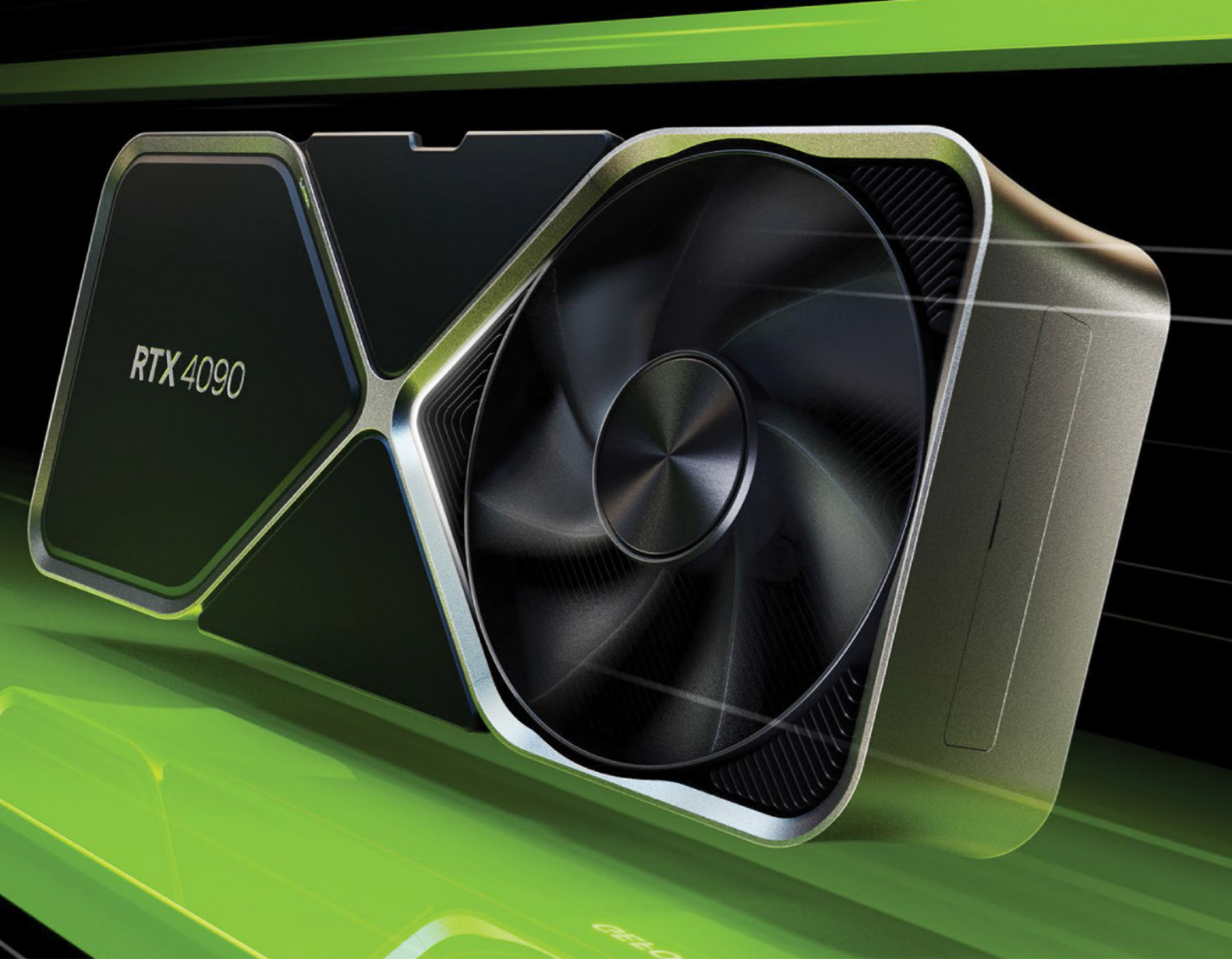
1080P

Once we adopted HD displays, games started telling their stories using incidental visual details that would have been a blur before.



DLSS

More framerate for (what feels like) free. Plus it's given us this iconic YouTube thumbnail template. How many more frames?!



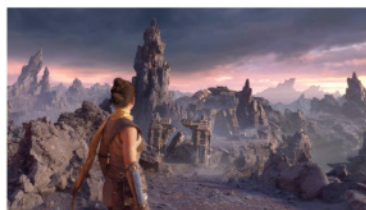
least vaguely comparable. Turning on DLSS frame generation with an Nvidia RTX 40-series card and watching your framerate shoot up as if new frames are being simply conjured from thin air is a truly joyous experience.

DLSS or FSR upscaling can be truly transformative too, not just because higher resolutions look nice, but because they allow you to turn on a bunch more resource-heavy visual options and retain a playable framerate. But compared to OpenGL Voodoo *Quake III* versus maxed-out *Quake III*? Forget about it.

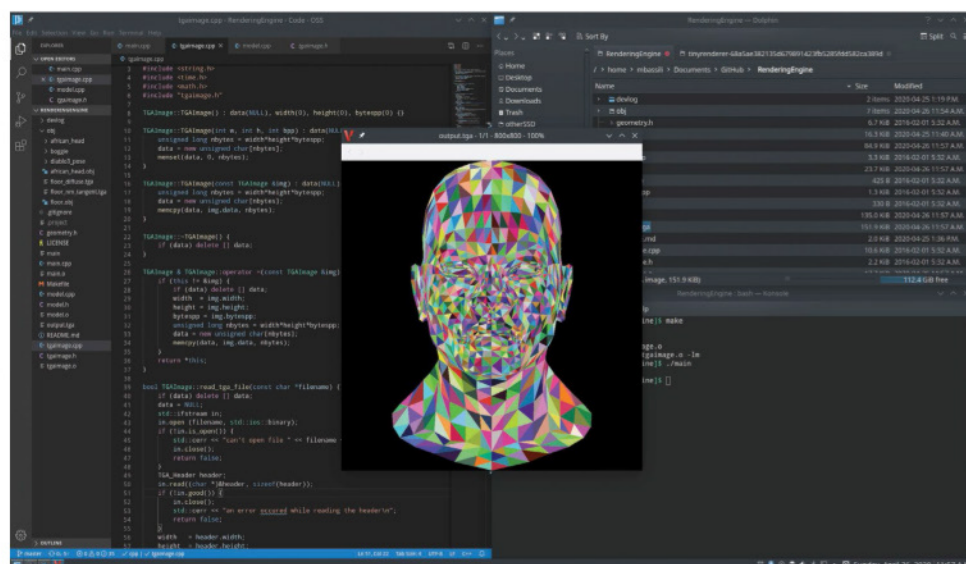
That's not a failing on the part of GPU manufacturers, but rather a strength of modern game engines – they're incredibly scalable now. UE 4 and 5 are all but ubiquitous, and they're built to cater to a much wider spectrum of cards than the engines running early 3D titles did. The upside is considerable: even laptop APUs can summon a reasonable amount of gorgeousness in modern titles. But the bittersweet downside: we may never again get the same 'this changes everything' kick out of a new GPU upgrade. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

RIGHT: UE5 is incredibly scalable.



BELOW: OpenGL made *Quake III* an incredibly scalable visual experience.



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

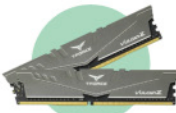
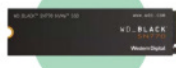
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,026

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £112 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £190 Intel's added four more cores to its entry-level Core i5 and it's become even more fantastic value.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 7600 AMD £252 You could spend a bit more on an RTX 4060, but for a genuinely budget machine we're siding with AMD.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £36 Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 550W Be Quiet! £95 We have to run a 550W PSU for the RTX 4060, as per Nvidia's recommendations.
SSD		WD Black SN770 500GB Western Digital £70 It's finally time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive even in a budget machine such as this.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash (we don't budget it), but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240 BenQ £132 You can get an excellent gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays, and this BenQ is our favourite on a budget.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £49 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: A hot-swappable mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G203 Logitech £24 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £40 Corsair's budget cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,551

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Mortar WiFi MSI £177 This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £199 Yes, this is the same CPU as the budget build. It's simply too good value to miss and perfect for high fps gaming.
GRAPHICS CARD		RX 7700 XT AMD £420 If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 13th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB DDR4-3200 Corsair £36 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 650W Be Quiet! £107 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with modern PCIe 5.0 connectivity.
SSD		NM790 1TB Lexar £71 The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation and a great price.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary or in the costing, but it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		S2722DGM Dell £260 With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £49 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 Razer £47 Tried and tested, this Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £85 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,334

MOTHERBOARD		MEG X670E Ace MSI £715 There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 9 7950X3D AMD £550 AMD's 3D stacked chips are awesome for gaming, thanks to heaps of cache. This Ryzen 9 is the best of the bunch
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4090 Nvidia £1,699 The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £155 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, though you'll have to request an AM5 bracket for AMD compatibility.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £118 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1000 Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		WD Black SN850X 2TB Western Digital £110 You could drop in a PCIe 5.0 SSD into this build, but it's even too overkill for us right now. The SN850X is a superb PCIe 4.0 drive.
DATA DRIVE		NM790 4TB Lexar £239 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
CASE		5000D Corsair £140 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		34 QD-OLED (AW3423DWF) Alienware £740 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Azoth Asus £250 This keyboard's secret? Lubed switches. Don't knock it until you've tried it. It's also wireless and very well made.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V3 Pro Razer £120 This is the best gaming mouse in our opinion, made better by an incredibly lightweight frame.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha Wireless HyperX £158 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUING ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“You have to restart two or three times before you know how to play it”

Finally acquainting myself with RPG history in **DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN ENHANCED EDITION**

After *Baldur's Gate III* set a new high-water mark in my favourite videogame genre, I had to work my way back through Larian's catalogue and see what I was missing. I had already developed a new love for *Divinity: Original Sin 2* on my first replay, so it was time to hunker down and sample the enhanced edition of *Divinity: Original Sin*.

From the jump, this is a game that requires research – as much, if not more than its sequel. The game's respect option comes with so many caveats as to effectively be unusable, and PC Gamer senior editor Wes Fenlon described *Original Sin* to me as a game you have to restart two or three times before you finally know how to play it. That definitely held true for me, but I think it was an

TED LITCHFIELD



THIS MONTH
Becoming a pyromaniac
who's good at everything.

ALSO PLAYED
Fallout, *Elden Ring*

acceptable price for an RPG this deep and interesting.

My guiding light is this married couple's website, tihie.com. In addition to recipes and blog updates about their family, it contains some of the clearest, most well-documented character builds and item info for *Original Sin* I've been able to find. It's on the order of the most load-bearing 2002 GameFAQs walkthroughs, and if Ashley and Micah's site ever goes down it'll be like the burning of the Library of Alexandria – at least as far as *Divinity* guides are concerned.

TOP: Quite a handsome party, if I do say so myself.

POWER GAMING

So on my third set of guys I finally got into a groove, particularly with one of Ashley and Micah's builds, the Dual Wielding Grenade Wizard, a kind of Fighter/Mage/Thief deal who's good at everything while sacrificing nothing. Both *Original Sin* games see you buying skills and spells instead of learning them on level up, so my first few hours in the town of Cyseal saw me hoovering up vendor trash from people's walls and tables, forming a tiny nest egg of funds and an arsenal of Molotov cocktails crafted out of empty bottles, rope, and oil. It's a funky sort of RPG early

IT FELT LIKE A SLAPSTICK VERSION OF THE SUIT-UP SCENE FROM COMMANDO



game to be sure, but I kind of loved it? It felt like a slapstick, Acme corporation version of the suit-up scene from *Commando*.

Suitably armed, I finally felt ready to launch into some non-tutorial combat encounters, and *Original Sin's* fights are unsurprisingly excellent. It's missing the killer edge of the second game's armour system, which removed random chance from crowd control, and both *Original Sin 2* and *Baldur's Gate III* got so much more creative with movement abilities and the shape of their combat arenas, but *Original Sin* is still a stand out turn-based, tactical battler. My go-to strategy for much of the early game was to cover the whole battlefield in flammable oil before just going hog wild with Molotovs, basically doing the white phosphorus scene from *Spec Ops: The Line* but in a fun, swashbucklery way.

In the intervening ten years, Larian has gotten so much better at storytelling and characters, pretty much unseating BioWare as the kings of RPG fandom obsession, but the core of what makes *Original Sin 2* and *Baldur's Gate III* so special was already fully formed in *Original Sin 1*. I just wish I hadn't waited a decade to finally check it out. ■



“He dies in a hail of gibbed body parts”

UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2004 is still a god-tier shooter

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Gibbed fools like he was 20 years younger.

ALSO PLAYED
Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes, *Crysis 2*

After about a 35 seconds of cooking fools, I have my head taken clean off by a sniper shot from across the map. I respawn next to the Flak Cannon and, grabbing it, I spin 180-degrees to fire down into the circular room where the Bio Rifle spawns. Two other combatants, one a robot and the other a heavily armoured warrior, crash into the room from the left, firing at each other wildly. The first doesn't see me coming, and I unleash the Flak's secondary fire, sending a grenade into his back. He dies in a hail of gibbed body parts.

The robot, on the other hand, does see me, and after switching to the Link Gun starts pummeling me with a laser beam. I dodge rapidly to the right twice and, before it can adjust, I close the distance between us and unload the Flak's primary fire directly into its metallic torso. The blast rips its left arm off and sends it spiralling, lifeless, into the wall.

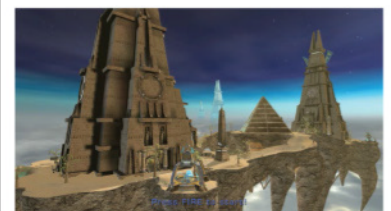
THERMONUCLEAR FUN

I sprint out of the room, dodging distant fire from a Shock Rifle and,

remembering there is a Rocket Launcher on the lower floor beneath me, I drop down to it, narrowly avoiding the nearby lava pit. Rocket Launcher in hand I turn and fire off a few rockets as I back into the teleported behind me. The rockets miss their target, but they've bought me time. Through the portal I grab the Reedmer, a portable thermonuclear warhead launcher and, from an elevated vantage point overlooking three other foes, I fire the Reedmer and run.

HOLY SHIT

This sums up *Unreal Tournament 2004*. Everything about it is dialled up to 11. For example, if you turn every graphics option up to maximum in the game's options menu, then you're treated to the *Unreal Tournament* announcer booming “Holy shit”. It sets the tone for the over the top, frenetic FPS action across any game mode you want, be that classic Deathmatch, Capture the Flag, or something more exotic like Onslaught or Assault that has vehicles thrown into the mix, too. It's a god-tier classic arena shooter that, to me, hasn't aged a day. After all, class is permanent. ■



“I want them to wake up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night”

The mental gymnastics of **ROCKET LEAGUE** keep me coming back for more

“**T**utorials for Blue,” one angsty teammate types in the live chat. Bah! Tutorials for blue! How dare they! Don’t they know I scored a hat-trick last match? Don’t they know how many hours I’ve put into this game? And just like that, I’m spurred on to prove this faceless assassin of character that I’m better than them in every capacity. Three minutes pass. We lose 7-2.

Rocket League is one of the few games I return to time and time again. Not because the gameplay is wonderfully addictive. Not because it’s essentially the Top Gear car football episode. Not because I’ve been playing since it was called *Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle-Cars* – a name that’s much cooler but understandably harder to market – but because of the shithousery between players.

‘Shithousery’ for those that are unaware is typically a British football term usually given to underhanded tactics, from diving to abusing the referee to time-wasting. It’s been around for decades, making up some

▶ MATT POSKITT



THIS MONTH
Playing car football to '90s Eurodance pop

ALSO PLAYED
Dragon's Dogma 2,
EA Sports FC 24

of the best and worst parts of the sport. It’s also a term that’s not completely defined so is thrown around a lot, like I am about to here.

SORRY!

My favourite type of shithousery in *Rocket League* surrounds the quick chat. So when someone misses an obvious scoring opportunity, the natural response is “Nice shot!” Or if someone fails to block the goal the same is applied at the other end of the field with a friendly, “What a save!” You get the idea. Whenever I score a goal and somebody has been

irritating, I like to throw in a, “Whoops...” or occasionally a, “Sorry!” if I’m really trying to get under somebody’s skin.

One of the relatively new additions to *Rocket League* is *Player Anthems*. These are songs that can be unlocked or purchased to be played every time you score a goal, and are the perfect embodiment of shithousery. My current pick is *What Is Love* by Haddaway.

In the *Rocket League* arena, I want opponents to tremble in fear whenever they hear the dulcet tones of Haddaway. I want them to wake up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night. I want them to shudder whenever the track comes on the radio. But on the off-chance I’m having a blinder – maybe scoring upwards of six to seven goals (hard to believe) – there is no greater feeling than hearing the tune played over and over until those sweet, sweet words present themselves: winner by forfeit. That’s when you know you’ve beaten them for good.

So SuperNINtendoChalmers, if that is your real name. Take this as a warning, Haddaway is coming for you. Tutorials for blue. Ha! ■

MY FAVOURITE TYPE OF SHITHOUSERY SURROUNDS THE QUICK CHAT



BELOW: Is there anything sweeter than a last-second goal?





“When life gives you knuckledusters, it’s rude not to use them”

Becoming a brutal and murderous crime fighter in **GUARDS!**

“We’re only here to collect the drugs,” exclaimed my crime-fighting partner who was taking things far too seriously. They were right, we were here to grab the boxes of narcotics and take them back to our police wagon, and given we didn’t need to subdue anyone to complete the mission we’d come in with non-lethal weapons. But one of the drug harbourers we apprehended dropped some knuckledusters with massive spikes on them, and when life gives you knuckledusters, it’s rude not to use them.

Smacking people in the face with solid metal gloves that have giant spikes on is a pretty effective way of making sure they don’t commit crimes, because they will be dead. It’s a controversial way of policing but in *GUARDS!* the only thing that matters is completing the mission in any way possible, and it turns out that knuckledusters work wonders.

GUARDS! is not a particularly complex game, you drop into a map

MIKE STUBBS



THIS MONTH
Definitely did not commit medieval police brutality.

ALSO PLAYED
Dota 2, Assetto Corsa Competizione

with a vague police mission to accomplish, then make your way through the medieval environments battering everyone you see, who all want to fight you.

But, it’s brutally hard. If you fail to notice one annoyed villager they can take you out in just a couple of seconds. The combat is chaotic, with motion blur and some very elastic bodies wobbling when they are hit, but it’s incredibly satisfying, which goes some of the way to explain my murderous rampage.

THE COMBAT IS CHAOTIC, WITH MOTION BLUR AND SOME VERY ELASTIC BODIES

BACK ON PATROL

The next mission, which was just about subduing a crowd of rowdy townsfolk, had a similar outcome. My metal-clad fists tore through anyone who got in their way, apart from one big hammer-wielding menace.

Fortunately, another member of my team, which had grown to five by this point because I forgot to make the lobby private, was around to take him down. They had clearly spent a lot more time playing than me, as they had some kind of harpoon weapon that they insisted on firing into my friend and me, creating a string between us that could be used to knock down any criminals.

There are unimaginable weapons available to honourable crime fighters, but if you ask me, none are as satisfying as the quick one-two combo of spiked knuckledusters. If this was a just universe I’d be tried for my brutality, but in *GUARDS!* I was celebrated for solving crime across multiple city districts, and I like to imagine that me and my knuckledusters became the stuff of legend in the criminal underworld. ■

HELLDIVERS 2

Loot treadmill. *By Harvey Randall*

Helldivers 2 is a miraculous thing – an instant monolith that was so immensely and immediately popular that its developers had to scramble to keep its servers afloat. Rarely have I seen a game so unplayable, yet so highly regarded in the early days of its launch.

That's for a few reasons, but chiefly it's because *Helldivers 2* is just a good time. In the initial gold rush, it presented simple and uncomplicated fun. It's a little less simple, now, with Arrowhead Games racing to meet two core promises it set out to achieve: new Warbonds every month, and the Galactic War.

There's a reason this update log isn't about a specific update – by the time it makes it to publication, any particulars I mention are likely to be outdated. At the time of writing, three premium Warbonds have been released. By the time you're reading this, there'll probably be four.

Each Warbond brings new weapons, armours, emotes, the whole hoo-rah. This is a blisteringly fast pace even by live service game standards, and I can't help but wonder if it's too much.

I like having new toys to play with, but I foresee a future in 12 months'

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE February 8, 2024	DEVELOPER Arrowhead Games
PUBLISHER Sony Interactive	LINK gloryforsuperearth.com

time when the game starts buckling under its own weight. In a year we'll have 12 new Warbonds, around 60 new weapons and 36 new sets of armour to contend with. How do you balance that? What about when there's 120 new weapons and 72 new sets of armour in another year?

I have faith in Arrowhead to continue making a damn fine game, but every studio has its limits. Cracks are beginning to form. With each new update, it feels like something breaks. At the time of writing, the latest patch has caused problems with the Punisher Plasma rifle, the Spear launcher still doesn't work properly, and the Anti-Materiel rifle doesn't have a properly aligned scope.

I don't think this is a sign Arrowhead isn't a good studio – it's just that the more moving parts are added, the more work it takes to maintain. By setting this pace, the good ship *Helldivers 2* may very well be tilting towards an iceberg while its crew is too busy bailing water. And that's just the weapons thing. Let's talk about the Galactic War.

WAR, WHAT'S IT GOOD FOR?

The Galactic War is awesome, and it feels like the first time I've seen a studio actually deliver on the promise of something like *Guild Wars 2*'s 'living story'. Players are given Major Orders which range from being over in 48 hours to lasting entire weeks – and their decisions shape the fabric of the map. At least, in theory.

In practice, we've already seen a couple of times when the player's decisions haven't mattered all that much. One Major Order asked players to establish a line against the robots and set up orbital defences, but when those planets were in danger, nothing really came of their past victory.

I HAVE FAITH IN ARROWHEAD TO CONTINUE MAKING A DAMN FINE GAME

Ultimately, the Galactic War is very cool – but it's also a kind of pact with the players. It's a delivery system for new enemy types, mission objectives, and stratagem releases. I'd like to underscore, though, that I don't think any of this is a bad thing. It's a unique and novel way to run a live service game, and I think it's working, but it's not without its flaws.

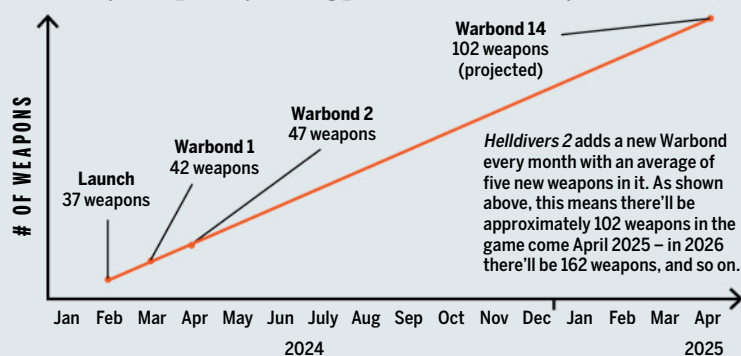
Similar to the Warbonds issue, players who are hooked on *Helldivers 2* will want the Galactic War to serve its unspoken promise: that there'll always be fresh battles to fight and wars to win. The more well-fed a playerbase gets, however, the bigger its appetite becomes.

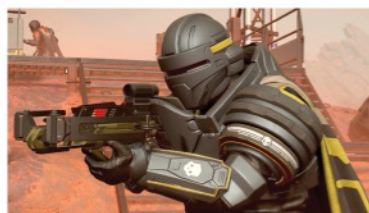
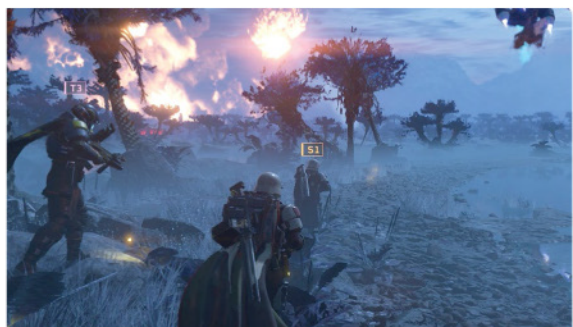
Content droughts aren't ever great for live service games (or their origin, the MMORPG) but they are often created by studio conditions. Something in the pipeline breaks, development slows down, and it's just not possible for the devs to push something out faster.

Helldivers 2 doesn't get to take breaks. While its patch cadence is commendable and incredibly impressive – it's also propped the entire studio up on a treadmill, and we all know what happens when you slip on one of those – embarrassment and sore knees. I'm having a blast, but some small part of me wishes it'd slow down for a while. For the developer's sake more than mine. ■

BALANCE BREAKPOINT

Runaway complexity = a big problem, eventually





ABOVE: Bring democracy to the galaxy by planting flags everywhere.

LEFT: "Guys, quick! There's only one copy of PC Gamer magazine left in the store!"





FALLOUT SHOW MODS

Modders let you bring the TV show into your Fallout games. *By Christopher Livingston*

It's official: not only is the Fallout TV show surprisingly good, it's a certified hit. Millions of people watched Fallout's first season when it arrived on Prime TV in April, and they enjoyed it so much it led to a resurgence in people playing the *Fallout* games. *Fallout 4* rocketed up the Steam charts to become one of the most played games of the month, *Fallout 76* broke its own record for most concurrent players on Steam, and even *Fallout 3* saw a big increase in player count.

Makes sense to me. Just seeing Lucy fiddle with her Pip-Boy in the first episode made me want to jump back into the game, and that feeling only grew stronger as I watched Max stomping around (and crushing skulls) in his power armour and the Ghoul blasting his enemies into glop

NEED TO KNOW

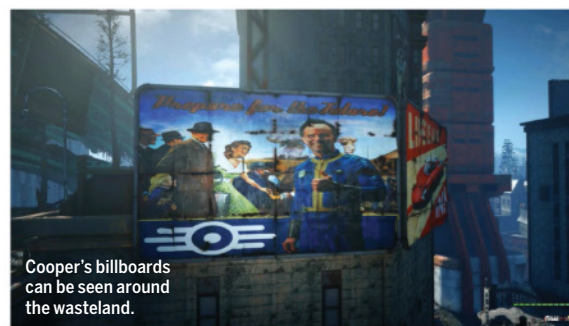
RELEASE Nov 10, 2015	DEVELOPER Bethesda Game Studios
PUBLISHER Bethesda Softworks	LINK fallout.bethesda.net

in slow-motion, an obvious callout to VATS and the Bloody Mess perk.

But if you're going to jump back into a *Fallout* game, you're gonna want to bring some mods with you, and modders have been busy bringing elements from the show into the various *Fallout* games, from weapons to billboards to Vault jumpsuits to character presets that will let you play as your three favourite characters from the show. War never changes, but games do, thanks to modders.

GHOUL SCHOOL

There are lots of menu presets for the main characters of Lucy and



Cooper's billboards can be seen around the wasteland.



LOOK 4 IT

Here are the best four locations to visit



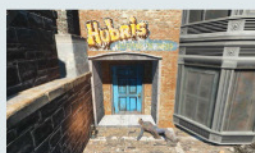
THE USS CONSTITUTION

Near Bunker Hill you'll find robots trying to fix a frigate. Help 'em and enjoy one of the best quests.



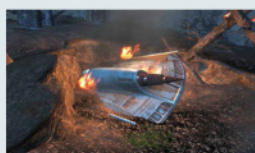
CABOT HOUSE

In the rusting ruins of Boston, what's up with this immaculate mansion in Beacon Hill?



HUBRIS COMICS

This store in Back Bay is hiding all sorts of goodies, including a legit superhero costume.



THE CRASHED UFO

You'll have to be level 20 before it arrives, but you'll find the crash site and some otherworldly fun.



ABOVE: Play as pre-war Cooper in style.

RIGHT: Pay your respects to Shady Sands in New Vegas.



Max, but if I'm gonna go back into *Fallout 4* again, I'm gonna do it as the Ghoul. It's always been a bit of a shame that Bethesda's *Fallout* RPGs don't let you play as a ghoul character when they're some of the most interesting people in the games. The *Revamped Playable Ghoul Mod* by cebius2 will let you leave your smooth skin behind and step into the shoes of a ghoul. You'll even enjoy the radiation immunity that ghouls have in the game. And if you want to play as the Ghoul from the show, look no further than the *Cooper the Ghoul Howard* mod by Jonin1433. Better yet, keep your options open with the *Vault Girl Recreations - Cooper Howard mod*: it does a damn fine job of recreating both versions of Cooper Howard: the dapper and debonair pre-war Coop, and the craggy (but still pretty much a smokeshow) 200-year-old bounty hunter known as the Ghoul. Of course, you'll have to do the Ghoul's voice yourself, but that's part of the fun.

Since you're stalking the wasteland as a ghoul with a tortured past, it'll help to be reminded of Cooper's backstory from time to time. In the show he was a spokesman for Vault-Tec, starring in their advertisements and appearing on billboards, so the *Cooper Howard Billboard* mod by MrBloodjack brings that to life in *Fallout 4*. As you explore the Commonwealth you'll occasionally see faded ads for Vault-Tec starring Cooper, giving his now-famous thumbs-up. You'll even find some movie posters from the Western films he starred in before the bombs fell.

OKEY DOKEY

If you're more interested in emulating the ultra-positive Vault dweller Lucy, you've got some options as well. While I haven't seen any character presets that look all that faithful to Ella Purnell, the actor who plays Lucy, there's still a few Lucy-based mods to enjoy. When Lucy first begins her journey by leaving Vault 33, she's got a handy blue and yellow backpack, and QwibQwibMods has brought that to *Fallout 4* with the *Lucy's Vault-Tec Backpack* mod. The pack isn't just sharp-looking, it also adds 25 pounds to your carry weight, and you can even upgrade it at your armour workbench. There's also a brown

version unbranded by a Vault number if you'd prefer, and a retexture by modder ModishNouns lets you replace the Vault 111 logo with Lucy's Vault number, 33. Pretty cool.

Even more exciting is Lucy's pistol. In the show she carries a single-shot tranquilliser dart gun that she puts to use pretty effectively – until she runs into the Ghoul, who's pretty resistant to anything less than a boatload of chems. Veteran *Fallout* modder Neeher started working on Lucy's gun before the show even aired, based on just a photo of it in a *Vanity Fair* article, and now you can use it yourself in *Fallout 4* with the *Select Blaster* mod. And it's got a few improvements to boot.

The blaster's primary function is as a syringer that fires a single tranq dart, and you can craft custom ammo for it at your workbench. But



THERE ARE LOTS OF MENU PRESETS FOR THE MAIN CHARACTERS

Neeher decided to give the weapon a few more features. The blaster can also be used as an energy weapon, and there are different cosmetic barrels and grips that don't mess with its stats. You can even find legendary versions of the blaster once you've reached level 15.

THROUGH VEGAS

When it comes to other *Fallout* games, like Obsidian's *Fallout: New Vegas*, there aren't quite as many mods to pick from, but there are a few. Modder Chad Nobark thoughtfully added a memorial to mark the fall of an iconic location from *Fallout* lore that makes up a big plot point in the TV series. Or if you're feeling a little less respectful, you can desecrate the memorial by attacking it, which will anger a soldier named Kowalski (the mod replaces an existing monument to the battle of Hoover Dam).

For something a little more festive, modder MrDeeAr added in several jumpsuits belonging to the Vaults shown in the TV series: 31, 32, 33, and 4, and you can wear them around in New Vegas. Simple. Classy. Effective. ■



BUILD YOUR FIRST TOWN IN MANOR LORDS

Become the veritable lord of the manor. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Easy

TIME
Ten hours

VITAL LINKS

Top Manor Lords tips:
[pcgamer.com/games/
city-builder/
manor-lords-beginner-tips](http://pcgamer.com/games/city-builder/manor-lords-beginner-tips)

Get more families:
[pcgamer.com/games/
city-builder/
manor-lords-families-
population](http://pcgamer.com/games/city-builder/manor-lords-families-population)



MAKE HAY

1 Since *Manor Lords*' maps are procedurally generated, your first port of call should be examining what resources you have. Keep an eye out for the crown symbols indicating a deposit is plentiful. Also be sure use the fertility overlay to examine your crops.



FOOD AND FUEL

2 Your food and fuel surplus is shown by the barrel symbol at the top of the page. Set up a Woodcutter's Lodge to get firewood and a Forager's Hut or a Hunting Camp to gather berries and meat respectively. You can turn berries into dye, and hunting animals provides hides.



OPEN MARKET

3 As you assign families to chop wood and gather food, they'll start asking you for a marketplace. You should build one as soon as possible since this is how you distribute goods to your populace. The wider the variety of goods, the higher your overall approval rating.



FAMILY PLANNING

4 One of the major benefits of high approval is population growth. As long as you have at least 50 approval and a free burgage plot, you'll get a new family each month, with 75 and up giving you an additional one as well. The families you already have will grow at a faster rate too.



PLOTTING

5 Of course, you'll need to ensure your subjects have homes and that's where the burgage plot comes in. These humble dwellings are very important as they provide item-producing workshops and upgrading them will level up your town.



MOVE MATERIALS

6 Since timber can only be hauled by your village ox, any building effort is likely to take a while early on. I recommend upgrading your stable as soon as you can by making a few planks at the sawmill.



TRADE SECRETS

7 Establishing a trade route costs wealth, but if you unlock the Trade Logistics technology, this is capped at 25. Find the highest value item you have, establish the route, assign a family, set the trade rule to import or export, and finally enter the surplus you want to keep.

MIND YOUR MANORS *Know your most important buildings*



1

BURGAGE PLOTS

These peasant dwellings are the most important building in *Manor Lords*. They make space for new families, but also provide passive food production.

3

MANOR

While your manor acts as your town's heart, it serves a variety of other functions, too. It controls the taxation and tithe that give you treasury and influence respectively.

2

CHURCH

The church doesn't really serve a function in *Manor Lords*. However, as with the tavern later, it's what you need to build if you want to upgrade your burgage plots to level two.



WHAT'S THE FARM?

8 You'll want a more sustainable food source than foraging. Find a place with good emmer (wheat) fertility, using the build menu overlay, then place down some fields and a farmhouse. Your farmers will plant in the spring and harvest in September.



BRIGANDS

9 It's likely that brigands will set up camps in nearby regions. If left to thrive, these bad 'uns will steal items from your village over time. The good news is that wiping them out will get you influence, while destroying their camps is a great source of regional wealth.



MERCS AND MILITIAS

10 To take down a band of brigands you'll need to hire mercenaries using treasury, or arm your citizens with weapons produced in your burgage plot workshops. Mercenaries are generally preferable if you can afford them, since you won't risk losing villagers.



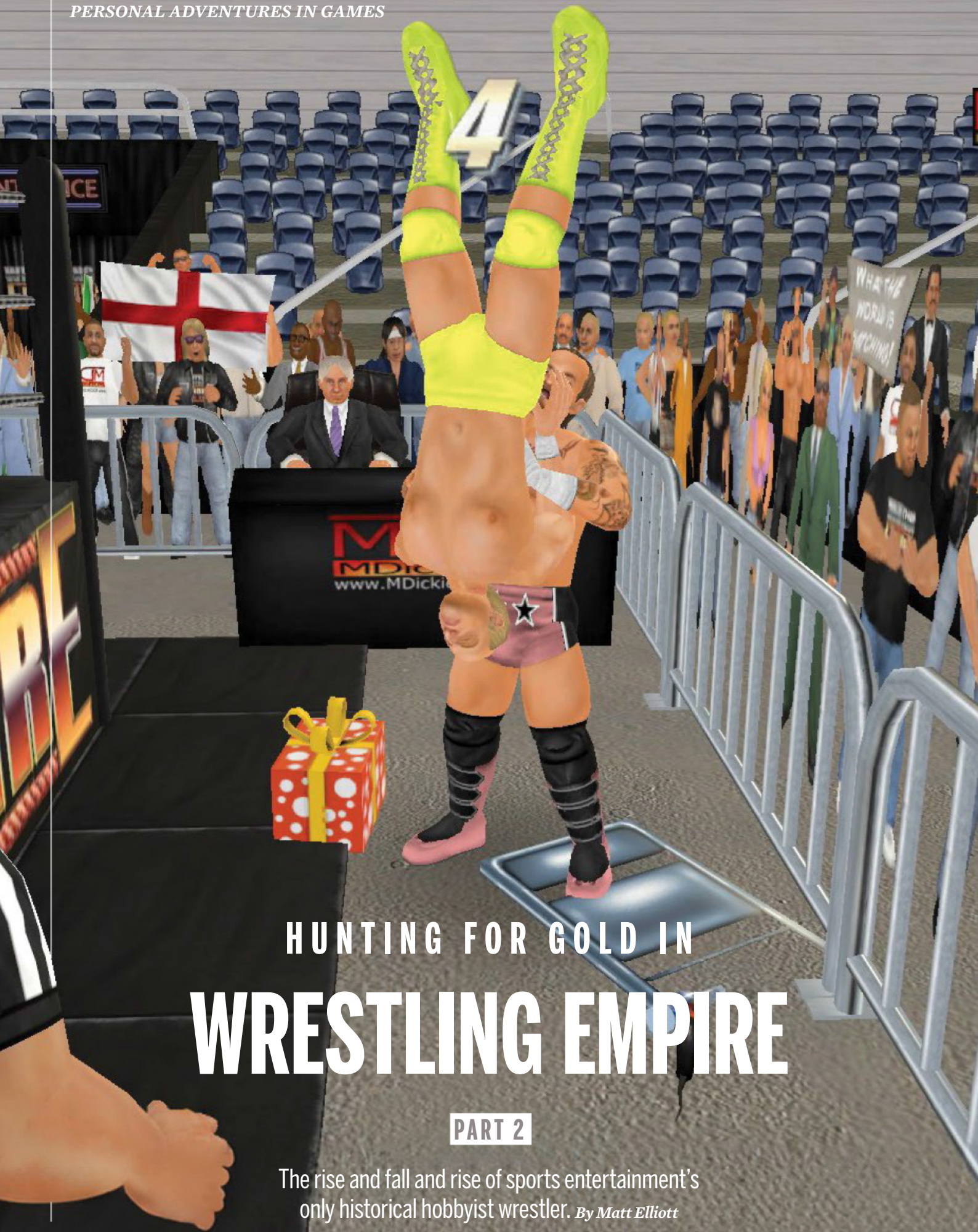
WAGING WAR

11 I suggest softening up the enemy with archers if possible and letting them charge into your shield wall. You can also position archers behind the enemy to shoot into their backs, though remember to toggle friendly fire so you don't hurt your own troops.



LAYING CLAIM

12 Once you've established a proper town, you can look to claiming new regions. This costs 1,000 influence, which you can quickly gain via building your church and manor. If another lord lays claim to a region, you can also contest them.



HUNTING FOR GOLD IN WRESTLING EMPIRE

PART 2

The rise and fall and rise of sports entertainment's only historical hobbyist wrestler. *By Matt Elliott*

He's back! By gawd, The Detectorist is back!" Assuming, of course, anyone even noticed he was away. Probably not. Such is the mild indifference to the return of wrestling's only archaeology-themed curtain jerker. It brings to mind the excruciating WWE comeback of Brian Christopher, son of Jerry 'The King' Lawler and the man previously known as Grandmaster Sexay. Such was the indifference of the crowd that the reboot of his career was over before he reached the ring. Hopefully, The Detectorist will fare better.

There are challenges ahead. When we last saw him, The Tizer Ringpull Terroriser was locked into a contract with Super Lucha Libre wrestling, a Mexican promotion that specialises in exhilarating, high-flying spectacle. The first problem is that The Detectorist has the agility and appeal of an orthopaedic shoe. The most dynamic move in his repertoire is a baseball slide through the ropes, the controls for which I've refused to learn on principle. Secondly, he's employed as 'enhancement talent'; or, as it's known in wrestling parlance, a 'jobber'. He only gets paid if he loses, and the only thing that matters is getting paid. This might be an acceptable place to be for a vigorous youth, but The Detectorist is 42 years old. His potential career is slipping through his fingers like the sands from a smashed hourglass. He's in danger of being a depressing Wikipedia stub. This is especially true in a game like *Wrestling Empire*, in which wrestlers can age and even die. The inexorable march of time is The Detectorist's most potent foe.

THE RULES

1. No shortcuts. Work your way up from the bottom.
2. No do-overs. Embrace the results, however badly it goes.
3. Money is everything, life is nothing. Make bank, crush opponents.

BABY STEPS

It's not impossible. Wrestler-turned-yoga guru Diamond Dallas Page didn't start wrestling until he was 35, so there is some limited hope for The Detectorist. Bolstered by these positive thoughts, I decide we need a change. The Saxon Trinket Suplex Machine spent the first part of the diary dressed, somewhat inexplicably, in red plaid trunks. As a concession to a fresh start, I update his outfit to a dashing gold, reflecting the ultimate goal of both his hobby and career. Somehow, during this process, I also accidentally change his prop from a thematically-sound

shovel to a ring step. As well as being unrelated to his gimmick, it's exceedingly hard to cut an engaging promo when you're cradling a piece of ring infrastructure.

Aside from that, we're off to a decent start. Almost immediately, another wrestler approaches The Detectorist, determined to put aside the rivalry between us. I'm fine with this, because until now I didn't realise we had a rivalry. A new tag team is born. Say hello to – and I promise I'm not making this up – The Detectorist and Uranus. A name that sounds like a banned children's book from the '70s. In Uranus' defence, he's based on Perry Saturn, a man so

THE PROMOTER, DEREK SWITCHOFF, SUGGESTS THAT HE TRY A SPELL AS A FACE

legitimately tough he rescued a woman from being assaulted by two men, got shot in the neck, then returned to wrestling once he recovered. The only danger is that Uranus will be such a competent partner that The Detectorist might accidentally win.

ABOUT FACE

The Low Tone Luchador continues to follow instructions, throwing matches and even stepping in on commentary. It's humiliating work for scant reward, not least because I've only just realised that carrying my prop to the ring – the stairs, remember, that I didn't even choose – is costing me half of my pay cheque. The Detectorist's attitude improves, to the point that the promoter, Derek Switchoff, suggests that he try a spell as a Face: wrestling slang for a fan favourite. And who among us wouldn't cheer for a balding, 42-year-old hobbyist relic hunter who's paid to lose every week?

It doesn't go especially well. After spending just a few months at Super Lucha Libre, the Pulse Induction Pugilist reaches the end of his contract. Derek Switchoff decides not to renew it. It's a crushing blow for The Detectorist, but not, perhaps, a surprising one; last week I accidentally hit Switchoff with a hamburger.

Bowed but unbroken, The Detectorist returns to Wrestling School, where you learn nothing and don't get paid. Only his erstwhile rival, Polka Paulo, is remotely pleased to see him.

The switch to a new federation also means saying goodbye to Uranus: words as painful to write as I'm sure they are to read. But perhaps it's for the best. The Detectorist was never a luchador. He didn't belong there. It's not a mistake he'll make again. From now on, the most electromagnetic man in sports entertainment will be true to himself. No more compromises. No more restrictive contracts. And he needs to get out of Wrestling School quickly. Just competing for such an inferior brand is hurting his popularity, even when he's winning matches.

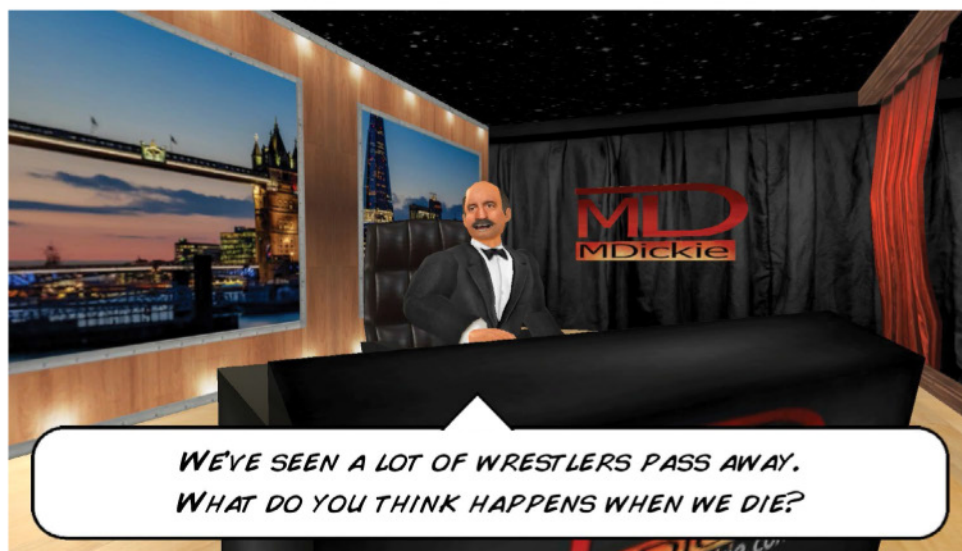


» CACHE ON DELIVERY

Sadly, no contracts are forthcoming. Despite schlepping it on the very lowest rung of the wrestling ladder, it's an eventful few months for The Detectorist. The Wrestling School promoter, Coach Emerson, suggests that The Detectorist try a new haircut, which is essentially a monk's tonsure with the front missing. This look, combined with the gold trunks, accidentally transforms our hero into a kind of desiccated British Hulk Hogan, with none of the charisma, balance, or physical presence. He also works up a nice little sideline in being paid to help other wrestlers illegally win their matches, which just about covers the cost of bringing a prop to the ring. The fans also decide that The Detectorist will never be a face, returning him to his comfort zone as a sneering, spineless villain. Then, something strange happens: I get booked in a match against the Wrestling School Group Project Champions, Mike Bail and Shank, a pair of orange jumpsuited ne'er do wells with whom The Detectorist has been feuding. His partner for this is Eri Konami, a dashing woman wrestler who he's literally never spoken to before. It doesn't matter. Through a mix of desperation, chemistry and a scandalous indifference to the rules of professional wrestling, The Detectorist and Eri are able to put their opponents away and take the gold. It's tag team gold, admittedly – the Temu version of a wrestling championship – but it's still a victory.

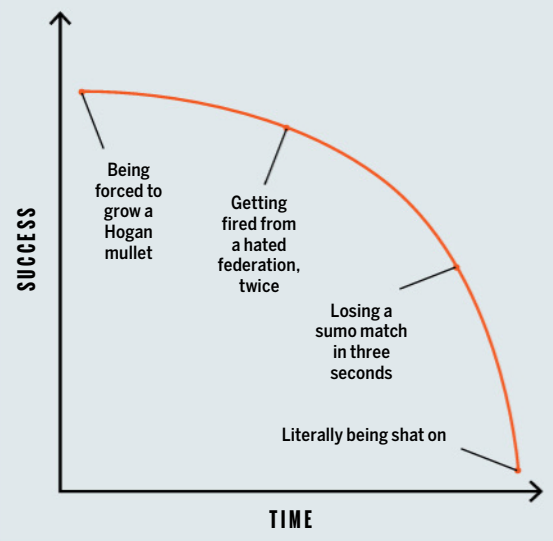
Bolstered by this unexpected success, it's only a matter of time before other promotions come looking for a slice of the Hedge-fodder Hellion. And, sure enough, just a few weeks after his championship win, a new promotion comes knocking at his door. The problem? It's Super bastard Lucha bloody Libre again, offering garbage money and forcing a no-compete clause. But the rules we set are clear: if the money is better, The Detectorist has to say yes. And anything is better than no money. He returns to the promotion that wronged him before, leaving his title belts and new tag-team partner behind. It's a terrible decision. After no time at all, confirmed wrestling villain Derek Switchoff tries to change the terms of my contract and reduce my pay. The Detectorist tells him to stick it up his discriminator, and Switchoff replies by promising to make his life hell. He even stoops to refereeing matches

BELOW: Come here for suplexes and big existential questions.



PLUMBING THE DEPTHS

The lows and lowers of a wrestling career



himself, which is an especially wretched way of ensuring The Detectorist fails. And the worst thing is that I can no longer write 'not even Vince McMahon would stoop that low!', because we all now know that his depths of stoopdom are too feral and preposterous to articulate. The only positive is that at least The Detectorist is reunited with Uranus *sideways glance emoji*.

SOILED AGAIN

Aside from that, it's a wretched time. His losses mount up. The company has turned against him. A 500lb wrestler accidentally shits on him in the changing room. And, before long, his contract ends – again – and he's right back to where he started again: older, sadder, smellier and only slightly richer. In many ways, he's happy for this to be the end of his story: as a mentor to the young, friend to Polka

Paulo, and mortal enemy of Mike Bail. The Detectorist prepares to slide into the warm bath of obscurity, and let the lustre fade from his dreams of stardom and gold. No more excitement. No big changes.

This is, of course, when Rising Sun Puro Puroresu gets in touch. They want to sign The Detectorist for a handsome \$1,300 a week, on the proviso that he doesn't have any creative control. Whatever recommendations they make, he has to agree to. This is a man, however, who agreed to shave himself bald for zero dollars a week, so the prospect of this doesn't frighten him. Rising Sun's first creative tweak is to change his music from effete British chamber music to pulsating, homoerotic disco. Does it fit? Absolutely not. Do we care? Also no. Despite being on the



A 500LB WRESTLER ACCIDENTALLY SHITS ON HIM IN THE CHANGING ROOM

far side of the world, with a gimmick nobody understands. The Detectorist is happy for the first time in his career. He even takes part in his first sumo match, which, at 6'2" and 145lbs, he is entirely unsuited for. As you might expect, he lasts around three seconds. It doesn't matter. The Detectorist has found his new home.

HOARD MENTALITY

Disaster strikes. He's approached by Strong Style Wrestling, another Japanese federation with an emphasis on stiff strikes and high-impact matches. Under normal circumstances, The Detectorist would never contemplate leaving his new federation, but our rules are clear. They offer him more money. He has to leave. This is something of a revelation for The Detectorist. The promoters expect more from him. He has to climb walls to improve his agility and punch bags to increase skill. Against everyone's expectations, he starts to function as a compelling, capable wrestler. I'm almost disappointed. He even starts lifting weights between

matches to increase his strength. If he doesn't get it to a certain level in a month, however, he's out the door. It's a lot to balance for a man with the athletic prowess of a loading zone signpost. He's almost there, when fate intervenes. He sustains a serious injury in a match against the *Wrestling Empire* version of Daniel Bryan, which makes it literally impossible to meet the goals set for him. He even tries paying for surgery to get back to strength quicker, but it's not even going to be close. He's a broken man. The bubbling sewer of Wrestling School beacons, once again.

Then, in his darkest hour, salvation arrives, in the form of yet another job offer. The problem? It's from Weekend Warriors, *Wrestling Empire*'s equivalent of the UFC. It's all cage matches, submissions and shootfighting. This is perhaps an even worse fit for him than Super Lucha

Libre: a place full of actual martial artists, with a significant, ongoing threat of physical injury. To the Weekend Warriors roster, The Detectorist is little more than a comedy stuntman. It's like making a naked mole rat fight a honey badger. Perhaps, then, it's time for a rebrand. The man formerly known as The Detectorist will now be known as The Coinshooter: the only fighter in history to combine mixed martial arts with the obsessive search for historical artefacts. But, for a man who spends his Sundays searching for evidence of medieval battles, perhaps the Weekend Warriors is the best place for him. ■

ABOVE: With special guest referee, Guy Who Brings His Guitar To Your House Party.



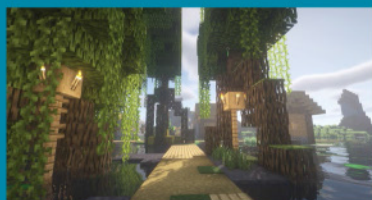


WHY I LOVE

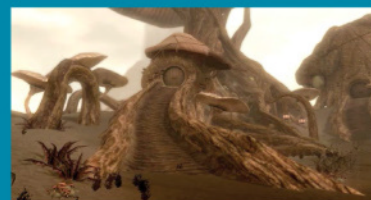
WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

ZONKING OUT TO LONGPLAYS

The restful sounds of trees and guards soothe my soul. *By Mollie Taylor*



LEFT: The calming sounds of crashing waves and pirate plunder, perfect for nodding off to.



They say it's bad for you to have a television in your bedroom, and even worse to go to sleep while it's on, but just who is "they"? Scientists? Pshaw. Silence is the enemy, and my brain must feast on soundwaves. I've been falling asleep with the TV on for as long as I can remember, and I've found the secret sauce to getting a good night's sleep with the perfect cosy background noise: longplays.

Now, I'm not talking about let's plays, the type where YouTuber273957109 is playing some guns-ablazin' spectacle, screaming down their battered toilet microphone. I'm talking about longplays – the 20-hour-long YouTube videos that come with zero commentary. Not only are they great for preservation, but they can be really neat ambient playthroughs.

Leisurely strolling through fields. Letting every single line of dialogue play out. The slow pans of the camera, soaking up every inch of the landscape. I always thought people who watched other people play videogames for fun were a bit weird, but longplays have given me a deeper appreciation for those who make them and the game worlds they're capturing so meticulously.

There's an art to picking the perfect bedtime longplay. It needs to be a game you've played before, so you're not tempted to open one eye every time you hear a noise or voice you're unfamiliar with. It also needs to be something that can be played in a laid-back manner.

SWEETROLL DREAMS

I've particularly fallen in love with *Skyrim* and *Minecraft* longplays. They're the perfect candidate for nighttime entertainment. I've always found something so inherently cosy about *Skyrim*'s medieval fantasy

SWEET DREAMS

Some more melatonin-inducing videogames



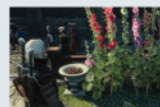
STARDEW VALLEY

The honeyed tones of crop harvesting and footsteps on dirt sends me to sleep every time.



SEA OF THIEVES

Not one I usually choose, but another popular pick. I think the water would make me need to pee, though.



THE WITCHER 3

Geralt's voice. That's it. That's all you need to be sent off into dreamland. A grumpy old man's soothing words.

vibes, even before I had years of baked-in nostalgia to deepen those feelings. Maybe it's something about how warm so much of the game feels, from the candles strewn throughout my home to the books taking up my entire inventory, all so I can place them on a bookshelf and watch them pop into existence one by one before collapsing into a heap.

Skyrim's enchanting music is no doubt doing a ton of the heavy lifting for those ultra-cosy and sleepy vibes, and can usually do a pretty bang-up

MAYBE IT'S SOMETHING ABOUT HOW WARM SO MUCH OF THE GAME FEELS

job of helping me doze off by itself. But there's something about layering the sound of the Dragonborn's feet hitting the dirt, or a Whiterun guard snarkily asking if someone stole my sweetroll that makes it all the better.

Loopy Longplays over on YouTube has proven to be a particular favourite of mine when it comes to these ultra-atmospheric endeavours around videogame worlds. The channel's *Skyrim* playlist covers everything from a 21-hour-long main quest video to

playthroughs of each DLC, to them taking a stroll through every single city in the game across 11 hours.

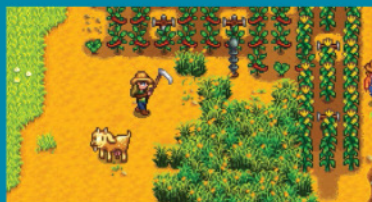
COUNTING BLOCKY SHEEP

Minecraft's longplays are covered by a much broader spectrum of YouTubers. Typing '*Minecraft* longplay' into the search bar will conjure up all manner of relaxing, hours-long videos, usually accompanied by some kind of rainfall while the creator goes about building a cosy cottage or lakeside cabin. Like *Skyrim*, it's privy to the soundtrack buff which, even outside of giving me the wistful fuzzies, encapsulates the calmness that a playthrough can bring. Sans creepers, skeletons and all the other scary mobs, of course.

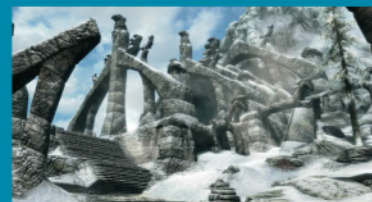
I also love lying there with my eyes closed, hearing the satisfying pops and twinkles of *Minecraft*'s various sound effects. A tree being punched or stone being smacked away at with a pickaxe are sounds that are ingrained into my brain from years of play, their familiarity soothing. Some may find it bizarre, but it's like being audibly wrapped in the fuzziest blanket you can imagine.

Games are meant to be played, sure, but the way they're made can also be used to send me off for some particularly sweet dreams. These longplays have proven to be the perfect cocktail of nostalgia, atmosphere and comfort all blended into one night-long virtual melatonin gummy. It feels like a testament to just how much lasting impact games can have on us, too, that they can create such feelings of ease and happiness.

While it's not a failsafe sleep method every night, my last few months have been almost entirely consumed by these longplays, and I can't imagine myself getting bored of them anytime soon. Whatever your comfort game, maybe try whacking on a longplay if you're having trouble nodding off. It might just work. ■



FAR RIGHT: *Skyrim*'s medieval fantasy vibe is so cosy that I can't help but get sleepy watching longplays of it. Fus ro doze!





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



Plummeting many floors in a hail of broken glass, the fight isn't over



CRYSIS 2

A cinematic FPS with tour de force visuals. *By Robert Jones*

The heavily armoured SWAT team member crashes through the apartment's left-hand window, rappelling in on a cord and blindsiding me. My Nanosuit detects the impending assault just before the impact, though, injecting nano-bots into my bloodstream and speeding up my reaction times massively. As a result, just as the SWAT is about to open fire I pivot my armoured torso just enough to destabilise his incoming trajectory. As the muzzle flashes and the rounds miss me by inches, we collide together sending both myself and the SWAT team member flying out the apartment's right-hand window.

Grappled together and plummeting many floors in a hail of broken glass, the fight isn't over, though, and both

the cop and I trade melee blows repeatedly mid-air until, finally, gravity catches up with both of us and we crash into the New York City street below. Luckily I'm wearing the CryTek Nanosuit, which switched to Maximum Armor mode just before impact, so I walk away from the encounter. The SWAT dude, in nothing but a tactical vest, isn't so lucky. He bleeds out on the sidewalk.

This sort of bombastic, cinematic set piece sums up *Crysis 2* perfectly. Indeed, this is a game that is, sometimes quite crudely, nothing more than a series of '80s action movie-style set pieces and cutscenes, with little room for any subtlety. As the Nanosuit-clad protagonist, you bring death to your foes, both human and alien, with such bombastic gusto that I feel it almost transforms into a violently relentless art form.

RELENTLESS VIOLENCE

Key to that explosive performance are the Nanosuit's ability modes (see boxout) that enable incredible combative feats. Such as, for example, letting you rip a mounted cannon off its stand and storm headfirst into a wave of enemy gunfire, rattling off rounds like there is no tomorrow, only to next minute fling the cannon aside, sprint at superhuman speed towards a bunker and, activating your suit's invisibility cloak, slip inside unseen and snap the neck of an enemy officer before grabbing his bodyguard by the neck and throwing him into an explosive barrel, the resulting explosion sending flames licking up the wall and cracking out into the under siege New York City streets.

But where other games may then take their foot off the gas, *Crysis 2* keeps the pedal firmly to the metal. Backup arrives in the form of a combat helicopter, which starts spewing 50-caliber rounds at the

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2011

DEVELOPER
Crytek

PUBLISHER
EA

LINK
shorturl.at/akMU9



There's a real commitment to cinematic flair.



» bunker. Once more calling upon the Nanosuit to inject nano-bots into my bloodstream, I burst through a hail of gunfire and slide behind a wall, firing at a solider as I do. Picking up a Joint Anti-Tank Weapon (JAW) from a weapons stockpile, I turn and, just as the chopper is about to fire upon me once more, unleash the rocket-propelled grenade. It catches the tail of the chopper, sending it spiralling into a nearby building and exploding in a rain of metal and glass. And it's then that I hijack the tank...

As I hope the description of some typical *Crysis 2* gameplay above shows, this is a game where less is definitely not more. It's big, bold, brash and loud. There's no pretence of great narrative depth, or deep character customisation (even though you can modify your Nanosuit and weapons a bit). No, this is an action game about a man in a futuristic advanced military combat suit fighting other human soldiers (who are trying to get the suit) and aliens, the latter of which are invading New

York City and spreading a humanity-culling virus. It's an '80s Hollywood action movie in game form.

ALIEN TECHNOLOGY

But while its tone may have felt old-fashioned even when *Crysis 2* originally launched in 2011, it's graphics and audio were very much from the future, feeling like exotic alien technology that felt far beyond anything else the gaming industry was capable of at the time. And that is still incredibly evident reinstalling the game today in 2024.

Crysis 2 remains a very pretty game to play. Yes, sure, when put next to a technical powerhouse such as *Cyberpunk 2077* running in Overdrive Mode, then the 13-year-old game comes off second best, but taken on its own, *Crysis 2* is a game that still looks better than many games released today, more than a decade later.

This wasn't exactly surprising back in 2011, as Crytek had already catapulted itself to PC gaming stardom with the original *Crysis*, which looked so good and was so incredibly demanding on the day's PC gaming hardware that it coined the whole 'but can it run *Crysis*?' meme, which endures to this day.

MAXIMUM AWESOME

The Nanosuit modes that make besting foes fun

1 ARMOUR

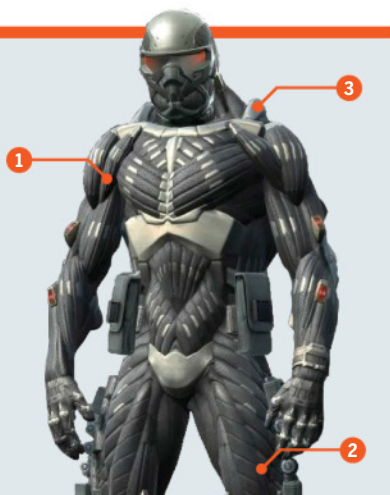
Great for when you want to assault a bunch of enemies, this mode lets you absorb much more damage.

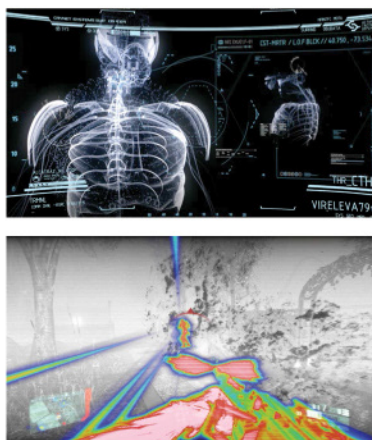
2 SPEED

This mode quickens your reactions massively, letting you sprint at incredible speeds and jump further, too.

3 CLOAK

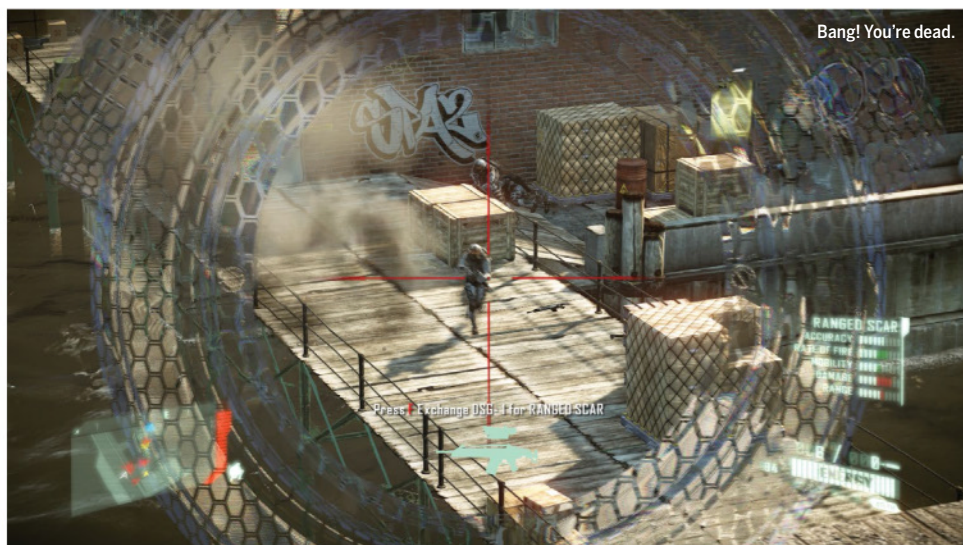
Activate cloak and, for a limited amount of time, you can be largely invisible. Great for sneaking up on foes.





ABOVE: The thermal imaging mode lets you live out your Predator dreams in style.

RIGHT: "What do you mean the last copy of PC Gamer just got sold!!!!!"



But still, Crytek took the graphical darling of the PC gaming world and then dropped even more eye candy on top, making use of the visual advancements that DirectX 11 could offer to the max.

Indeed, when you read the list of graphical enhancements that *Crysis 2* delivers in DirectX 11 mode, it's easy to understand what a visual leap this game was. Enhancements include Tessellation and Displacement Mapping, Parallax Occlusion Mapping, High Quality HDR Post Processing, Improved Tone Mapping, Real-Time Local Reflections, Custom Shape Based Bokeh DOF, Improved Water Rendering, Interactive Water, Realistic Shadows with Variable Penumbra, Contact Shadows, High Quality HDR Motion Blur, Particle Motion Blur and Shadows. Yeah, it was a big visual leap.

UNDERRATED IMPORTANCE

However, as much as *Crysis 2* looked a million dollars, and did review well (if not incredibly) at many publications, including PC Gamer who gave the game an 89 out of 100, I think it fair to say that it wasn't quite so glowingly received as the original game, and swiftly forgotten. I remember speaking to PC

A GAME THAT STILL LOOKS BETTER THAN MANY GAMES RELEASED TODAY

gamers at the time who were disappointed with how linear it was (New York City's streets felt very claustrophobic), as it lacked the original game's more expansive, sandbox-y environments. While its attempts to add depth to the game with Nanosuit customisation felt shallow and was, largely, inconsequential. Unlike *Crysis*, which enjoyed almost half a decade in the sun as the pinnacle of gaming graphics, *Crysis 2* did not enjoy that, being followed by the barely different or better *Crysis 3* (review score: 81) just two years later.

Looking back now, though, I feel *Crysis 2* (and to a lesser extent, *Crysis 3*) have a rather underrated legacy in the history of PC gaming. Yes, sure, these games didn't usher in a new age of gaming and change the entire industry like a *Half-Life 2* or a *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, but what they absolutely did do was keep the PC at the very forefront of graphics and cinematic, high-fidelity

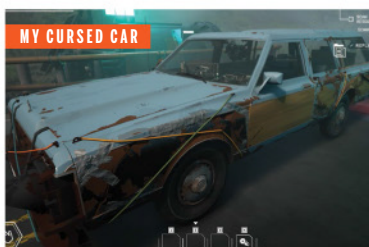
gaming experiences. These games shifted huge amounts of graphics cards and other gaming components for well over half a decade and laid down a benchmark for other game developers to chase after with their own games in terms of realism and fidelity. And, let's remember also, at the end of the day, Crytek delivered three FPS games that all reviewed well. How many series can say that?

FORCED EVOLUTION

For this reinstall I used *Crysis 2: Maximum Edition*, which is the original game as it was released back in 2011, as that is the time-authentic experience I wanted to relive. And I can confirm that this version of the game looks and runs fantastically on today's hardware. If you buy it I'm sure you'll have a great time. However, there's also the recently released *Crysis 2 Remastered* edition, which delivers even higher resolution textures, better lighting effects, and real-time ray-traced reflections, too. It doesn't change the gaming experience, but if you want the most *Crysis* experience you can have, which I argue is striving to play in the highest graphical fidelity you can at all times, then that's the *Crysis 2* evolution to play today. ■

JODY
MACREGOR

I like horror games that make me afraid to be alive, but sometimes I want something gentler. A bit spooky, but you can actually go to sleep after playing it.



MY CURSED CAR

PACIFIC DRIVE

pacificdrivegame.com

→ *Pacific Drive* emulates the loneliest moments of *STALKER*, when it's just you and a zone full of anomalies. Then it gives you a car to cross that zone in – a junker so full of quirks and personality it makes up for the fact the only NPCs are on the radio.



THRILL SANDWICH

RESIDENT EVIL REVELATIONS 2

game.capcom.com/residentevil/en/rev2.html

→ The most self-aware *Resident Evil* – the one that's in on the joke. It knows we know every helicopter will explode and Barry Burton will say something ridiculous. This is the Scream of the series, the call that's coming from inside the house, delivered with a nod and a wink.

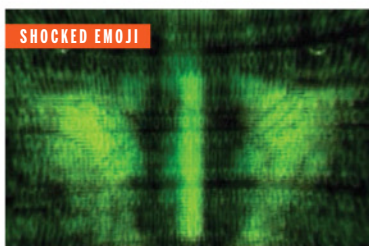


RADIO BLA BLA

OXENFREE

nightschoolstudio.com

→ Though the inexplicable radio phenomena can be unsettling, the real joy of *Oxenfree* is the banter between your friends, which mimics the fast-paced, witty dialogue of a good teen horror flick. And like the best of those, *Oxenfree* has enough twists to keep you second-guessing.



SHOCKED EMOJI

SYSTEM SHOCK 2

nightdivestudios.com/games

→ *System Shock 2* is the rare game where audio diaries as exposition make sense. It's set on a spaceship full of scientists, of course they'd be leaving notes in their dictaphones. And of course those notes devolve into screams as the experimenters become the experiments...

MUST



PLAY

**A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW**

by Jody Macregor



ZOM QUEEN

LEFT 4 DEAD 2

l4d.com

→ Playing *Helldivers 2* has reminded me how special *Left 4 Dead 2* was – the rare co-op shooter that's as fun to play solo as with friends. When they've all moved on to the next flavour-of-the-minute shooter, I'll still be over here evading witches in the sugar mill.



LONG-TERM CLEMORY

THE WALKING DEAD

skybound.com/the-walking-dead

→ Like a lot of zombie stories, *The Walking Dead* pulls the typical 'man is the real monster' stuff, but what it makes you really feel like a monster for is the fact you're failing at being a parent. Clementine's watching your every move, and She Will Remember That.

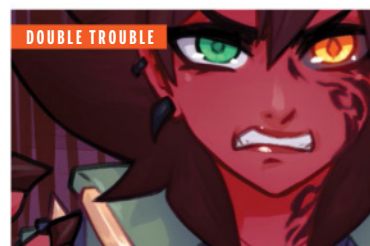


HOME BODY

ANATOMY

kittyhorrorshow.itch.io/anatomy

→ A simple game of exploring a house at night, looking for cassettes that play weird monologues. *Anatomy* is a work of domestic dread: the childhood fear of having to close a curtain when it's too dark to see what's outside until you're right next to the glass.



DOUBLE TROUBLE

LOVE SUCKS

bio.link/artwitchstudios

→ Buffy the Vampire Slayer as a horny visual novel, set in a college full of sexy monster hunters, undead and demons. You play the Xander of the story, a hapless normie on a double date with a vampire and a succubus you probably won't survive. Yes, it's quite NSFW.



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IT'S ALL OVER...



THE PCG INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **DLSS INDEMNITY**

Damn this town. It'd started when the dead woman's sister, Annabel, had knocked on my door one rainy evening. "I need your help, Dick," the reserved, delicate beauty had entreated. "It's the insurance company, they're not paying out on my sister Isobel's double indemnity policy. They're messing me around, Dick, even when it's obvious my sister's death was a tragic accident. I need you to go to the apartment and confirm the fire was started by Isobel's PC's dated GPU going bang. That way I can get paid and move on with my life." I could never say no to a dame.

Scoping out the burnt-out remains of the apartment, Isobel's rig was indeed where the blaze seemed to have started, now a warped, black skeleton of metal. But why Isobel herself, as proven by DNA testing on the charred corpse, had been found dead near the rig, her discovered location now marked on the floor with white tape, I found less convincing. But it wasn't that hunch that would lead me to the truth in this case, but a chance encounter with a neighbour who, as I was leaving, handed me some of Isobel's mail she'd kindly taken in for her the previous week. Reading it revealed two things. One, Isobel had been in debt, badly, and two, she also once again missed her late-sister's memorial family catch-up, too, much to her mother's displeasure. It was then the dime dropped.

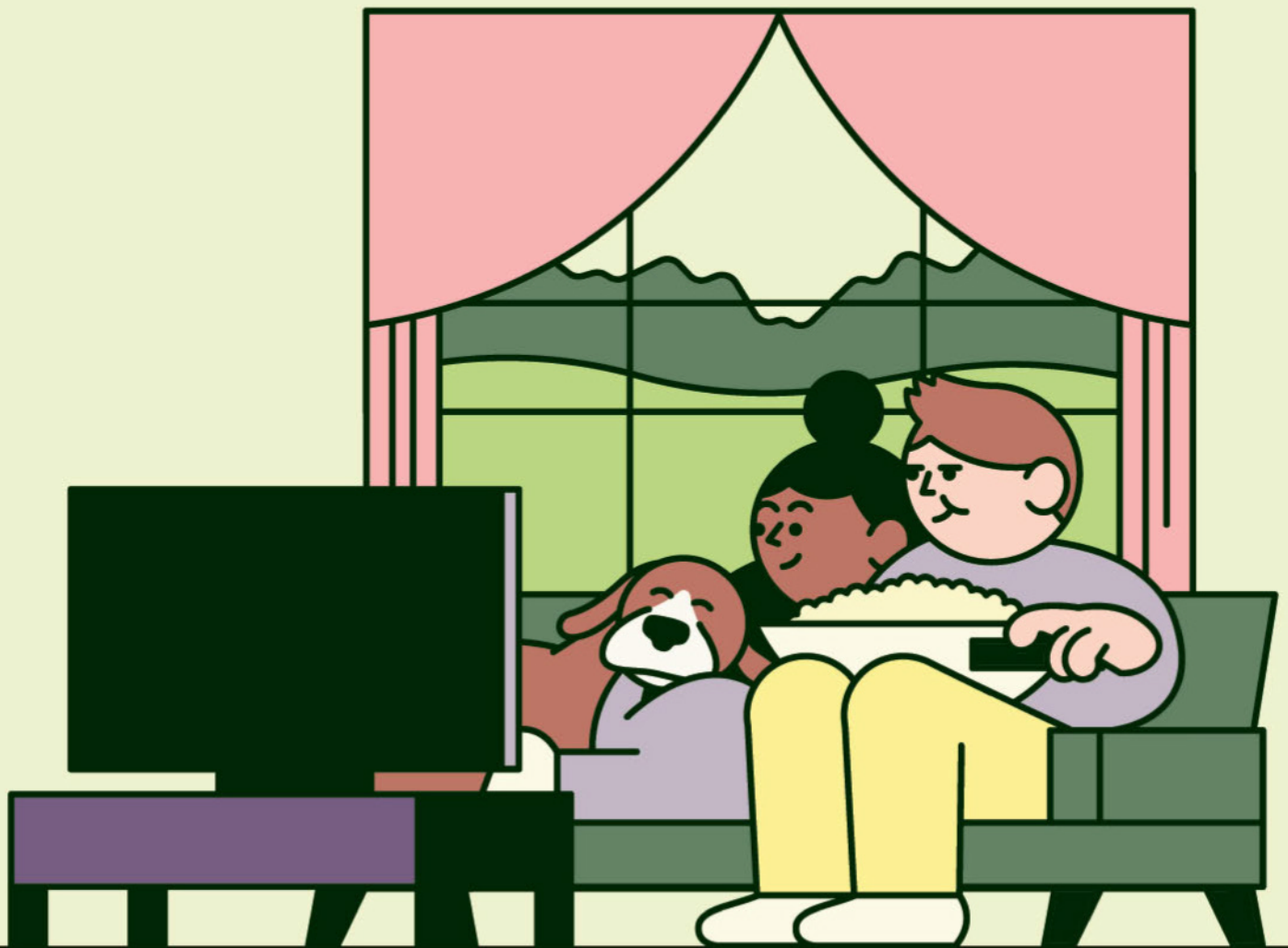
"It's all over, Annabel," I'd said as, gun in hand, I'd approached the dame's white picket fence house on the edge of town. "Or, should I call you by your real name, Isobel." That's right, after taking out a huge double indemnity insurance policy with 'Annabel' listed as executor, Isobel had faked her own death, exhuming her dead sister's corpse to take her place in the apartment, and then burnt it down, assuming the dead sister's identity. "Just tell me why Isobel? Why did you desecrate your sister's body, fake your own death, and then burn down your apartment?" "Why?" she rasped, now all pretence to be the reserved dead sister dropped. "Why? For a chance of a new life with a new rig, Dick, one with a GPU capable of DLSS 3.0. I just couldn't stand the low framerates anymore and had no money for an upgrade. And darling Annabel, always mother's favourite PC gamer, was only too happy to oblige. Damn you, Dick, damn you to hell! I was so close."

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